

PROTOCOL ONE, BOOK 2

DEEP FREEZE

The background of the cover is a dramatic, high-contrast image of a city street. The street is covered in a thick layer of snow or ice, and the buildings on either side are also partially frozen. In the distance, a bright, glowing light source, possibly a sunset or sunrise, illuminates the scene, creating a strong lens flare effect. Two small, dark figures are visible in the distance, walking away from the viewer towards the light. The overall atmosphere is cold and mysterious.

JACQUELINE DRUGA

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Protocol One
Book 2

By
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One – Error

Anna

March 1

It was given a name, but for months, every time I thought of the comet I struggled to remember what it was called. One would think the name of such a devastating and life changing event would be easy to remember. Perhaps I just wanted to remove it from memory. If I didn't know the name, it would never be real.

It was real.

The comet was named Dempsey. Typically an astral being is named after the person that discovered it. No one really knows who first lay claim to the rock. Decades earlier it was discovered and the truth was hidden.

Funny how it was named Dempsey. Like Jack Dempsey the boxer, the comet took its toll. It gave us its best left hook, punching into earth and rendering us unconscious.

A champ at what it did. Its own icon forever embedded, like Dempsey, in history.

Everything changed.

For the most part, I'd say we were exceptionally prepared. For months prior, I had no idea why I was buying the things on the 'to get' list given to me by my overprotective and often zealous prepping ex husband, Gil.

I was used to the mad dash of getting things just in case. This time was different. Because Gil was married to the Vice President's daughter, he knew the doomsday comet was coming years before it did. He waited until the last minute to tell me what the event was and where I was to go.

It was planned that I would venture to the bunker before the news went public. Gil even sort of assigned a security person to me and my son, Jackson. Tony would keep us in the loop and ensure we got to the bunker. A little more complicated than that, and though Tony went above and beyond what Gil ordered, it boiled down to the same result.

We made it to the bunker.

Albeit the impact of the comet occurred first, we still made it to safety before the bulk of the aftermath arrived.

There were a few things that occurred along the way we didn't plan on. Our original passenger list consisted of me, Jackson and three others. However we picked up a few along the way, so to speak. Even Tony and his daughter weren't originally on our agenda.

Another thing and the worst of all that we didn't count on was for Jackson to get seriously injured and die.

My son, my only child suffered a head injury when the ground shook and he lost balance. He tried with diligence and succeeded in making it to the bunker, only to pass away moments after arriving

there.

Forever my heart will ache for him. Not a day goes by that I don't think of him and miss him with heartbreaking intensity.

The bunker lost its luster for me. Why live when my sole reason for being on the earth was gone. I pushed on. Our underground home provided us with everything we needed, comforts and all, everything but the ability to remember the world had changed.

I wished instead of chickens it came with a psychic button so I could have avoided the choices I made.

With everything I was, I believed I was doing what was best for all. Deep in my soul people were good, that's what I thought. I was proved wrong when we let a group of survivors into the bunker and they turned on us.

We prevailed in the standoff and still that didn't shake my confidence in regards to the human race. Until that moment.

Never would I have seen it coming. Gil had his plan to rebuild civilization, one step at a time, using everything he put into motion years before. A solid continuation. His vision along with my desire to help was the catalyst to our dilemma.

A simple search and find mission gone awry. Tony and I were to go into the city, scope it out, look for survivors, see what remained.

The weather was against us. We should have turned back. Our confidence in our state of the art vehicle led us to believe we were invincible.

The city, at least the first sector we hit was a frozen tundra. Everything appeared crystallized and grey and the newly falling snow didn't help the dawn of the new ice age feel.

All of it was expected after the comet. Plummeting temperatures up north, unpredictable weather.

If anyone was alive, they certainly weren't coming out in the weather.

"There is supposed to be an underground shelter around here, Anna," Tony said.

Where, was the question? We were near a river. Frozen over, debris wedged tightly in the chunks of ice.

So quiet that the simplicity of sounds would be heard and the woman's cry for help caught our attention.

She begged us from a distance. Help. Someone was hurt.

Why wouldn't we think she was being honest? After all, no tire tracks, we were probably the only answer to a prayer for help.

Something inside of Tony must have sensed it was a trap. Why else would he have us take every single thing from the Humvee? In that brief moment we loaded our arms, I thought maybe he feared someone smashing a window and taking our stuff.

But the second the woman slipped inside the building, my gut churned that something was wrong. She went inside.

The very moment we opted against giving her assistance was the very moment we realized they lured us and helped themselves ... to our Humvee.

Again, sound traveled. They probably heard us coming, thought of the plan. What would have occurred had we not gotten out? Whatever the case, we erred in judgment for even stopping. We stopped, we got out, and we left it running. We trusted. I blame myself because I was always one foot forward to extend a hand.

No more.

My bleeding heart clotted instantaneously when the final straw snapped in my attempt to help others.

We were stranded in a frozen city. The only help we were now obligated to give was to ourselves.

That was my focus.

TWO – Left Behind

Tony said some single syllable choice words in his frustration. I almost did. Really, through, what could we do?

Tony gazed upward, allowing the large clumpy snow to smack against his face. “Right now, we find shelter.”

The woman that cried for our help had stood in the open double door of the Waterfront Casino. The lack of any lights or smoke, caused our retreat. However our retreat wasn’t fast enough.

The casino was our only shelter option at that moment.

We had pulled around from the river road, and left the vehicle on the street near to the large parking garage.

An isolated spot.

Internally that reiterated to me even more that it was a ploy.

We headed back, bogged down with our bags. Tony reached for the casino door located under small awning. He opened it and stopped.

“What?” I asked him. “What’s wrong? You think there are people in there?”

“There’s not a soul in here.” He stepped back.

“What is it, Tony?”

“This is a side entrance.” He pretty much dropped all his bags. “It’s only been a minute. Stay put.” Hurriedly, he moved backwards. “He had to pick her up.” He spun and took off.

I yelled his name but he was determined.

He managed to move quickly in the snow and ice, although it was a challenge. He slipped as he rounded the bend but never completely fell.

What was he doing?

He just left me there? Alone? I was furious and scared, but only for a split second, when I realized why he took off running.

Tony had to believe he could catch them. In thinking about it, he was probably right.

We were getting ready to turn around when we heard the woman cry out. The side street was blacked by abandoned cars and a fallen ramp from the freeway. The driver had gone back around on River Road to get to another side of the casino. Another entrance, unless he abandoned the woman, she ran through the casino to meet him.

On foot, Tony had more of a direct route.

Along with being hopeful, I was cold. My gloves were still in my pockets and my coat wasn’t even zippered all the way. Even though I was protected by the small awning, the wind picked up and the snow smacked against me.

Out in the cold or go inside in the dark? I contemplated. Was it safe inside the casino? My guess was anyone in there was opting for the Humvee they carjacked.

Chasing Tony was out of the question, I didn't want to chance leaving our stuff and I certainly couldn't carry it all. Swinging around my personal backpack, I pulled out the revolver that Gil had issued me. Hating to do so, I removed the safety. I always had this fear of the gun accidentally going off. I adjusted what bags I could over my shoulder and revolver in hand I opened the door.

Immediately I was hit with a crisp cold that smelled of dust and burning rubber. The rubber was more electric, a remaining smell when the power surge hit and burned out electronics.

I set down the bags just inside and holding the door open with my body, one at a time, I brought the other bags in. Enough gloomy daylight came through that door to light the small entranceway just a tad and I didn't need to pull my flashlight.

It was a ceramic tile entrance way with metal chairs and a security guard podium. The walls had frost as well as the floors. At least the parts that weren't exposed to daylight. I piled the bags in the corner against the wall by the door. Then moved two chairs in front of them. All of which was difficult because I did not want to let go of my gun. I expected at any time someone to jump out. I also expected Tony to return.

Being in a silent world had advantages. I didn't hear the Humvee, I didn't hear voices or gunshots.

I heard nothing.

That worried me.

THREE – The message

It seemed like forever as I waited on Tony. My back to the bags, I kept looking out the door, then across the dark casino. There were specks of light. They more than likely came from another doorway. How long had it been? Two, three minutes? In that time my emotions ranged from anger that he had left, to worry because he hadn't returned.

The snow fell so fast outside, it was nearly a whiteout, the wind picked up and my tracks were covered with fresh snow.

Standing there my mind imagined the worst. I envisioned Tony hurt, ambushed by the people who took the Humvee. Even though it wasn't all that long, I decided to cross the Casino and look out another door. My flashlight was on my belt and I pulled it out. The casino was huge, it could have been a mile. It seemed that big.

I focused on the daylight that made its way across the blackness of the gaming floor.

My insides shook as well as my hand. I hoped I didn't have to fire the gun; my hand trembled so badly, there was no way I could aim steadily. A few steps into my journey, I heard the three tones, like a melody. What was it? I was confused for a moment and then it dawned on me. Gwen's BlackBerry. She had been communicating with someone before arriving at our bunker and left that phone with a bag of her personal stuff in the Humvee. I charged it while snooping, and it was still charged. The soft leather bag was on top of our belongings, and I hurriedly grabbed it.

It was a message.

'Haven't heard from you. Are you okay?' the message from D read.

I responded, 'No. Rescue mission into Pittsburgh gone wrong. Stranded. Phone is dying. Need help. Please contact Protocol One. Found shelter in the casino.' I reread what I wrote, and without letting them know I wasn't Gwen, I hit 'send'.

I breathed out and the phone beeped again.

'Hang tight. Be safe. Stay warm. I will get you help.'

Politely I replied a thank you and placed the phone in my pocket in case whoever it was sent another message. The unit really was on its last bit of battery life. I didn't get a chance to charge it for very long.

There was a sense of relief that I was able to get a message out for help, but I couldn't focus on that. I was too worried. Tony had not returned.

Where was he?

FOUR – tracks

My plight did not end with that message. By my honest calculations it had been close to ten minutes. That was far too long, and once again, after tucking the phone in my pocket, began my venture across the casino floor. I kept my focus forward, needing only to get to the door and I avoided looking around. There was so much to see in that one building. How things had deteriorated. A part of me needed to see what happened to the world in every aspect. The casino was my base, my belongings were there; I'd have time to see and explore when I returned. I had to. How was I to understand completely what drove survivors to do what they did, when I was sheltered and safe? It is easy to judge and say "I never will", when you aren't there or haven't experienced it.

My boot caught something, sending it sailing across the floor. The sound jolted me and I reminded myself I was the cause of it.

Although gloomy, the fast falling snow helped make it brighter. I reached the main entrance. It was open and large, a fountain sat center stage, but the water inside was gone. Before going any further, I tucked my pant legs tightly in my boots, secured my hat, hood and face scarf, along with gloves and walked to the door.

Hating to do so, I replaced the safety on my gun. I stood more of a chance of it going off with the clumsy gloves. Who was I kidding? I was about to venture out into the snow, I would be clumsy all the way around.

There were two sets of doors, the outer one led to a huge entranceway with a valet area sign all of which was protected by a cement canopy. There was some snow there from where it blew in.

As I approached the main doors I saw it. A trail of water glazed across the floor from the far right door. After crossing the first set of doors, I noticed the wet area continued to the outer doors on the right. Had someone gone out and come back in? That was the door they used and so did I.

As soon as I pushed the door, the blast of wind took my breath away. I raised the scarf to cover my nose and mouth, and wished I had pulled the goggles from the gear because it wouldn't be long before my eyes watered.

To my right was the river, ahead of me I could see the football stadium and to my left was the parking garage. Virgin snow covered the ground around the garage. No tire tracks. Foot prints would have been covered, at least some, four inches if not more had fallen since we arrived.

The river, even frozen seemed to toss a frigid gust of air at me. A small road ran perpendicular to it but was blocked off at a point. River

Road. We had taken it as far as we could when we had to turn around. That was when we heard the cry for help. Looking around, I saw the course of Tony's thinking. Clearly the person that stole our Humvee either turned around and followed our route to the blocked point or went around the casino completely.

Where to begin?

The canopy offered some protection from the elements and it was fortunate that I was able to see multiple footprints in the snow in the valet circle. They went toward the river and then disappeared. At least from where I stood. It was my intent to follow them and that was when I noticed more footprints. Those were near to the building, as if the person came up close, rounded the bend and ran inside.

The footprints in led one direction, toward the valet area.

It all started making sense.

Or in my mind it did. There was a reason the casino didn't feel used and held the odor of the burnt electronics. It was a forgotten haven. People or rather survivors didn't consider it. Maybe they did but found it useless, who knows.

A single set of footprints not yet covered in snow went directly to the far door.

I pieced it together. If the people who took our Humvee spotted us circling the city their shelter had to be near there. They sent the woman as the decoy, she ran into the casino, saw she drew us from the car and ran back in knowing we'd follow.

All while her partner in crime took our ride.

He or she, the driver, probably had plans to meet the woman elsewhere.

Tony thought of this. He had to.

The woman ran through the casino out the main doors and toward the river.

That explained those footprints. She could not have had that far of a lead on Tony.

I crossed through the canopied valet section into the snow, watching the tracks.

There definitely were more than one set. One of them bigger, it had to be Tony's. But the footprints faded and grew harder to make out. They ran through the snow, kicking it up covering things.

Prior to the storm, the ground was glazed with ice and hardened snow. The fresh layer added traction and I was able to walk, but that wouldn't be for long if it continued to clobber the area. I'd need a walking stick or pole to keep my balance.

I walked directly to the river, standing on the road. It was gray and desolate. The wind blew fiercely and the snow felt like acid as it hit on parts of my exposed face.

I felt alone, as if there wasn't another soul alive.

If ever there was a true vision of barren and desolation, it was there in that moment. I was a speck. A mere dark dot in the white of it all. To look at the buildings they screamed vacant and empty, the taller ones burned in spots, cars were left abandoned all around.

Did the car thieves go East past the stadium or West out of the city?

My chest was heavy with frustration and sadness. What the hell happened to Tony?

I lowered the scarf and inhaled to cry out. The cold wind rendered me breathless.

When we left the bunker, Peter said it was thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit. Granted the temperature had dropped, yet it was still warm compared to what it was weeks earlier.

I took a breath through the scarf and yelled out my loudest, "Tony!"

The snow offered so much insulation there wasn't even an echo. My voice was just absorbed with a deadened sound.

"Tony!"

I need to find tracks, something to follow, and get direction.

The snow to my right was smooth, untouched, unlike that to my left. Even though there were no defined footprints any longer, the snow was disrupted, it lacked that untainted look.

Taking a gamble, I opted for left and headed east toward the stadium.

For a block, it was free and clear of cars and trucks, mainly because most of my journey was across what I believed was a parking lot, just before the Stadium, three foot concrete barricades were set up to form a wall. A military truck remained. No one was in it. Its canvas covering was frozen. Both driver and passenger doors were open. It looked like a rush to escape.

My first thought was, the underground shelter. But surely, someone would have heard me call out.

I peered to the sky, wiping away each flake that fell to my face, looking for smoke, something that signified life.

There were no tracks whatsoever around the barricade or truck, mine would be the first. The truck struck me as odd. It lacked that frozen food look, frosted over, windows cracked by sudden change temperature. Had it arrived not long before?

By all accounts, everything should have been iced over. I examined the truck, it was empty inside the cab and the back was bare as well. Not a paper, piece of lint, nothing. If it had anything, any supplies, they were gone. Was the stadium the shelter or was it elsewhere?

Pulling back my coat sleeve, I cleared the frost from my watch. It was nearly two PM. We had left the bunker four hours earlier. Before continuing on, I pulled out Gwen's phone, hoping it was still powered. I needed a time gauge.

It was working. The power indicator blinked. It would be dead before I made it another block. My last message was sent sixteen minutes earlier. No new messages had come from Mystery D.

Sixteen minutes. Which meant it was pushing a half an hour since Tony dropped the bags and took off running. A half an hour in wasn't an exuberant amount of time for someone to be gone. But in the scheme of things, in a dead frozen wasteland, it was an eternity.

At the Bunker – Peter

I likened it to being God. Not that I had a God Complex, really I didn't. If I were to compare myself to a religious figure, more than likely it would be the Apostle Peter. The stand up guy, right there, seeing things, knowing things, spreading the word. Yet, having the ability to plead the fifth when backed against the wall. Although pleading the fifth isn't an endearing quality at times. It certainly wasn't for Saint Peter.

My daily purpose in the bunker made me feel important as I sat in the safe room, half the day watching security cameras, monitoring the radios. While I was primarily the scientist, the guy with the "know how", the scientific knowledge is only needed so much buried a hundred feet below the surface, sealed away in the wake of a global catastrophe. Sure, I get asked questions, but not enough to keep me busy. My talents were better spent in conjunction with the safe room duties.

I liked it. Playing God. I am watching you. Let's face it, I am a nosey person. Always was and always would be. Eyes on it all, I could zoom in anywhere, see it happen, do my best, and sometimes awful lip reading of what was being said. All while indulging in my guilty pleasure of sipping on a juice box. The straw perched to the side of my mouth so I could bite on it. Cherry was my favorite. I don't think God would sip a juice box, He might. They're pretty good.

The afternoon shift was mine. Tom, the security guy and pretty much the only other person besides me and Anna to work the safe room, was out on a survival run. He left with Skyler, an Army sergeant who had gone AWOL to be with his "partner" for the end of the world. His partner, Craig was our resident medical man.

In fact, it was a busy day. Two survival runs went out. I was needed to keep radio watch. Then again, I probably would have taken watch anyhow, just to stay occupied. Admittedly though, since Gwen showed up things were more interesting.

For some reason she seemed to behave as if the bunker was her own private resort and refused to see it otherwise. She made the mistake the first day of, "ordering her dinner brought to her room." She was none too happy when it didn't arrive. She went directly to Nelly who does most of the cooking.

Nelly is a trip, seventy-five years old, sassy and an excellent marksman. I swear she probably chewed tobacco in her youth. Right now she just rations that abundance of Pall Malls she brought.

Gwen gave her hell and Nelly blasted right back. I didn't hear what was said, I only watched and read lips. I'm pretty certain Gwen didn't ask Nelly to, "Wash her breasts in bleach" but it looked like she

said it and Tom and I got a good laugh.

In fact, I was watching Gwen run frantically from floor to floor using each shower for the three minute limit before going to the next. With the ten minute reset in place, for Gwen to get that hour shower, she would be at it all day. I didn't get it. But it kept her out of Nelly's hair and mine.

There weren't many people I didn't like, Gwen was one of them. However I put on a good front, because she was up to something, I just knew it.

The last of my juice box sputtered in the straw when the radio hissed with static.

The all too familiar sound. I didn't think much, because I believed it was the duo of Tom and Skyler or Tony and Anna.

Until they called out.

"This is Damnation Alley to Protocol One, do you read? Damnation Alley to Protocol One, do you read? Over."

"Oh, yeah," I smiled and spoke out loud. "The big guns are calling."

Before responding I grabbed an in house radio and called out, "Hey Senator. DA is radioing. Over."

"Thank you. On my way. Out," Gil replied.

The big guy, the top honcho. Granted Gil paid for the bunker all in the name of his undying, unrequited love for his ex-wife Anna, he still wasn't here the whole time. Anna ran things, and oddly, she just handed the reins over to Gil.

I returned to the radio and took the call from Damnation Alley. It was the 'big' bunker. The President was there. Gwen came from there. Probably was a rest for her.

Pampered in the Apocalypse

"This is Protocol One, I read you. Over."

"Protocol One we received a distress call from a search and rescue team claiming to be from your camp. The distress call stated they were stranded in Pittsburgh. Taking shelter in a casino. Over."

"Why would they contact you? Seems rather odd. Over."

"Dude, really?" It was Mulligan, my favorite radio guy. I didn't recognize his voice at first because not only was he being official he had been battling bronchitis for some time. "Seriously? Do you have people out there or not?"

"We do. Over."

"A massive storm has rolled in. It may impede rescue attempts. Over."

The massive storm. I cringed. I saw it, but it lingered north. I was getting quite good at predicting the weather. Unfortunately, I predicted the storm would keep north and it shifted. What the hell?

“Did they give any other information?” I asked.

“Negative. Communication lost now. Distress call came in thirteen hundred-forty. Over.”

“And they called you. Just seems weird, that they’d radio Texas when we’re closer.”

“I’m out. Out.”

Was Mulligan having a bad day? They got a distress call from Pittsburgh. I didn’t worry much, because at first I was confused and believed it was Tom and Skyler stranded. Then it dawned on me the second the door to the safe room opened that it was Anna out there.

“What’s going on?” Gil asked as he walked in. “They still on the radio?”

“No.” I shook my head and stood. “Gil, we have problems. DA received a distress call from Pittsburgh. Anna and Tony reached out to them for some reason. They are stranded and holding up at a casino.”

“Son of a bitch.” Gil spun and slammed his hand into the door way. “Anna is out there, stranded? I knew it. I knew she shouldn’t have gone. What the hell happened? Something had to happen. Tony would not just get stuck.”

“That storm I said would miss us ... didn’t. It’s huge and showing no signs of stopping. That probably is it.”

He turned and headed back out the door.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

“Out to get them.”

“Didn’t you hear me? The storm is bad. More than likely that is why they’re stuck. We can’t help them if we get stuck out there as well. Another day or two. Tony is there. They’ll be fine.”

Gil groaned. “Fine. Get on the radio, try to reach them. I’m gonna work on something. Some way, I’ll get to them.”

He walked out with determination and I turned my chair back to the panel as I whistled. “Oh, sure, you’ll go get them. Tony will just love that.” With an exhale, I grabbed the radio.

FIVE – Wisdom and Calm

Anna

Controlled by emotions and driven by a little fear, I didn't think things through clearly. That realization came when my nose felt sunburned and my fingers slightly numb. With wind blasting negative temperatures at me, I wasn't going to make it very long before I suffered the effects of being ill prepared outside in the elements.

I figured I had roughly three hours of daylight left and weighted my options. I could continue on and maybe make it another hour or I could head back the two blocks, get to our bags and grab the Arctic Armor. I weighed my choices. While going back and redressing would eat up time, it still allotted me more search time out in the cold.

Heading back, I looked ahead and once more saw that parking lot. I counted the levels. There were ten of them. That was where I needed to go after I redressed in appropriate clothing. It would give me the advantage of seeing what I could not from the ground level.

My boots were the only specialized piece of clothing I wore. The coat I had on did give some protection, it was arctic gear, but it was bulky, I wasn't layered in clothing and it did little to stop the wind from seeping into the jacket. We unloaded every single bag from the Humvee, so my survival through it all was not in question. I believed I had all I needed and plenty of shelter around me. Tony was my main concern.

One of the duffle bags was named the stranded bag. It was packed as a 'just in case' we did get stranded. It contained Mylar blankets and Mylar sleeping bags, Armor-All long underwear and suits called Arctic Armor. The whole bag weighed maybe fifteen pounds if that. I remember first seeing the Arctic Armor and laughing. Bibbed pants and coats that were lightweight. The boots weren't even a challenge to walk in. No way would they work. How wrong I was. We tested them while temperatures outside the bunker were as low as negative thirty. Not once did I get cold or feel the wind. Of course our tests were limited to one hour, but I had all the confidence in the world that the suits would work under the current conditions.

I held high hopes as I approached the casino that Tony would be back, that somehow we missed each other in passing.

Please, be back. Please. I begged in my mind as I made it to the canopied main entrance.

There was also a chance that someone else had made it in the Casino, so as I entered the door, I pulled out my gun.

Once inside I called out. "Tony."

No response. A sickening feeling hit me. I had wished and prayed he was there. He wasn't.

After calling out once more, I unzipped my coat and fumbled for my flashlight to make my way back across the large casino.

My focus again was getting back to my bags, not really looking too much around. I'd have time when I returned because obviously, I wasn't going anywhere. I made a mental note here and there about things I saw, things that would aid in my all night survival.

Half way across the casino floor, I heard it. In the empty large room it was loud.

Peter calling out.

"This is Protocol One trying to reach Team A and T. Do you read? Anna? Tony? You there? Over."

I hurriedly raced across the room toward the dim light of the doorway where I left the belongings. I thought we left the radios in the Humvee. We didn't and they were still working.

"This is protocol One, Anna? Tony? Come in."

"I'm coming, I'm coming." I said and when I arrived at the bags, I searched through. Where was it coming from? Where was Tony's backpack? I had just tossed everything in the corner.

Peter's radio call was steady, he paused only a few seconds in between each call, which gave me the tracking signal I needed to find the bag. The bags sprawled around the floor, as I finally found the backpack sandwiched against the wall.

I unzipped the bag and pulled out the radio.

With a nervous voice and slightly out of breath, I replied. "Protocol One this is Anna. I hear you. Over."

Pause.

The voice switched. It no longer was Peter. "Oh, thank God," Gil said. "Anna, we got the report from Damnation Alley. They said you were stranded. Over."

"Roger that," I said. "About as stranded as one could get right now. We stopped to help a survivor and the vehicle was hijacked. We did unload our bags in case of trouble so I have supplies. Over."

"How in the world did you lose the vehicle? Over."

"Please don't ask. It was a sequence of events."

"Why didn't you radio us?" Gil asked. "Why did you radio Damnation Alley?"

I hesitated before answering. Getting into the fact that Gwen left her BlackBerry in the Humvee was trivial, so I avoided being honest. "They responded for some reason. Maybe the wrong channel," I said. "But you got the message. Over."

"We're gonna get a rescue team to you. Over."

"Gil, you need to wait. The weather is really bad. Besides, I can't

leave until I find Tony. Over.”

“Wait. Find Tony?”

“He ran after the people that took the Humvee. He never returned. Over.”

“How long?” Gil asked.

I glanced at my watch. “An hour. He’s been gone an hour.”

“Oh, my God, Anna. Listen, we’re watching the weather. Turn off the radio to save the battery. We’re manned twenty-four seven, so call out any time. Stay inside, you know the routine. Shelter, warm.”

“I know. I know. I will. But I need to go. Daylight is wasting. Over.”

“Anna, stay put. Over.”

“I can’t. I have to look for Tony. I’ll check back. Out.” Before any arguments were made and anymore power used, I turned off the radio.

I took a moment, hand to the radio, forehead pressed against it. I gathered my courage and my mindset, then I placed the radio in the backpack, pulled out the ‘just in case’ duffle, and prepared for my second journey out there.

SIX – Floor Ten

The Arctic Armor was exactly what I needed. It was lightweight and provided me with more mobility. I was not a creature of the snow. The only time I saw snow was when we took a vacation as a youngster and visited an aunt out east. Snow was new to me. How to deal with it and even walk in it. I underestimated the weight it held and how it hindered movements.

In the time I took to take that radio call and change my clothes, more snow had fallen and it didn't show any signs of letting up. I left out the door where I kept the bags. The last place I saw Tony. My idea was to go back to where we left the Humvee. Six inches of snow was not enough to bury the tracks. It couldn't be.

We had parked it on the side of the garage. Sure enough, the slightly covered tire tracks swerved some and then went in another direction avoiding the fallen overpass. No turning toward the casino. However, knowing the woman crying out for help was part of it, there was a meet up place. There had to be.

The garage was my best answer.

A doorway was next to the side ramp and I opened it. As guessed it led to a stairwell. The moment the door closed, it was black. So dark, had it not been for my flashlight, I wouldn't see an inch in front of me.

The concrete stairs with a metal edge were slick from ice and making the journey up was dangerous and frightening. Everything I saw was through the scope of light the beam provided. A small scope. I knew I wasn't taking that route down. Even though it was longer, I'd walk the garage to get back to the street. I couldn't take a chance of falling and getting hurt.

My bunker experience afforded me stamina with the stairs, I was barely out of breath when I reached the tenth floor. The door was hard to push open, it was blocked with snow, but I moved it enough that I could squeeze out.

It was a blanket of white, so smooth it didn't look real. The outer door of the stairwell was marred with black marks, possibly soot. The glass doors that led to the elevators were shattered. I trudged across the tenth floor to the complete other side. That would give me the best view out. Behind me was the river, cluttered roadways and disabled ramps.

From watching movies, one wouldn't think snow was so difficult to walk in. However, once it reached a certain depth, it wreaked hell on your legs. Lifting, tromping, unable to move fast.

It was exercise and I knew by the end of the day I'd be worn out.

Unlike everywhere else, the roof top level did not have a single car. Nothing. I made it to the edge of the roof and leaned against the edge wall. Being at street level, nudged between buildings, gave a limited view. The rooftop did not. In the distance, I couldn't tell, but I swore I saw black smoke. It was a thin line. I reached into my sack, which draped sideways over my head and across my chest and pulled out the binoculars. Sure enough it was a stream of black smoke. It was far away, yet, not the only one. All across the city, thin streams of smoke carried into the gray sky. It was hard, with everything so white, to judge distance.

I knew one thing.

There was life.

The garage allowed a great view of the main part of the city located across the river. Bridges were white from snow and ice, the tall buildings there clearly scorched by the heat wave after the comet. Some were even damaged.

I began my scan of the area for the Humvee and I realized I was at a severe disadvantage. The fast falling snow blocked a clear vision, and also covered the entire area in white. Not only did the stadium and ramps block a clear view of vehicles on the street, looking for the Humvee was like searching a needle in a haystack.

The Humvee was white. More than likely it was camouflaged and seeing it would be like determining the truth behind an optical illusion. I imagined how I would look in the distance. Surely, if Tony was looking for me, I'd be spotted. My suit would make me a moving red dot in a sea of white.

As good of a view as it was, I was finding nothing up there and wasting time.

On foot would be my only answer. I prayed at that moment that Tony was one of those streaks of smoke, that he took cover somewhere because he lost his way, got confused with the snow. I knew for a fact he was without his map, but he did have his small personal sack, like I did. He didn't drop that.

When I turned to leave that was when I caught just a glimpse of it. I thought maybe I saw wrong, so I moved across the level of the garage to the corner that faced the river.

Asking myself "*How did I miss that*" was an easy question to answer. It was located near the river shielded by a hillside. The white of the huge satellite blended in nicely with snow, there was a building there as well, but that wasn't what caught my attention.

Was it a ship? A long boat? Lifting the binoculars again, I saw that it was neither, but rather a submarine. It was long and narrow, and could have passed for a ship-sub hybrid.

What the hell as a submarine doing in the river? After focusing

again, I saw it was not only docked there, but connected to some sort of pier or walkway.

An attraction of sorts? However in the aftermath of the comet it wasn't a tourist attraction, it was a vessel of life. I knew this when I saw a small amount of steady smoke emerging from the conning tower.

I knew the name 'conning tower' because Tom called the safe room that since we were able to raise our own video periscope. The conning tower had ventilation.

The smoke meant heat, life ... Tony.

Would he be there? It was so close to the casino building, yet, neither was visible to the other because of placement.

Like I had thought before, Tony lost his way, maybe he was even injured. With that on my mind, and knowing where to go, filled with a little bit more hope, I left that parking garage.

Seven – Anchored

Time was my enemy and like most enemies, I underestimated it. From walking back and forth, changing my clothes, taking the stairs, scoping the area, I used up a lot of time. By the time I reemerged from the garage, I had an hour, if that of daylight left. Which meant I couldn't go too far.

The next day I would do better, manage better.

Hopefully, that wouldn't happen, I'd find Tony, tucked in the control room of the submarine, burning something for heat and using the scope as a means to vent the smoke.

After leaving the garage, I walked down the road toward the river and literally slid my way down the embankment. The building with the satellite dish was just about a block ahead. I suppose there was a road or driveway to get to it, an easier way other than sliding down a hill. The building was not my goal, the submarine was and it was located at the wharf near that building.

There were no footprints leading there. Then again, Tony could have come from the other side or his prints quickly covered by the falling snow.

A long dock near the building led to the deck, if that was what it was called, of the submarine. The blue and yellow entrance sign was covered and the words hidden. The long dock was snow covered, but in one piece, I began my crossing.

The submarine, like the military truck wasn't encrusted in ice and frost. It was covered with fresh snow, but other than that it was in great shape.

The dock led to a plank, which brought me to the 'Deck'. While I couldn't see what lay beneath the snow, I knew I didn't walk on a submarine, but rather a tourist walkway.

Drawing closer I could see the smoke. Again, like the other smoke streams it was thin. Almost as if it was deliberately being hindered. I headed to the conning tower and prepared to call out, when I heard the man's voice.

"Stop right there or I'll shoot."

It wasn't Tony's voice. Where was he yelling from? I peered around.

"Hands in the air." He ordered.

I lifted my hands then my eyes. The falling snow made him hard to see. Wearing a thick dark coat, armed with a rifle, the man stood on the conning tower.

"Let me make a suggestion. You have five seconds to turn around and leave, or I will shoot," he said.

“Please don’t,” I replied. “I’m just looking for my friend. We got separated. He may be injured I don’t know. Is he there?”

“You’re a woman,” he stated.

“Last I checked. Is he here?”

“Hold on.” The man shouldered his rifle, then climbed down the exterior ladder. How he did so without slipping or falling was impressive. He obviously sensed I wasn’t a threat, then again, maybe he was just as naïve as I was.

Figuring it was safe to lower my hands, I did.

He approached me, pulling his rifle forward in his grip. “You alone?”

At that point I wondered if I made a mistake. His face was hard to make out through the thick hooded fur. He had a beard, I saw that. “I just need to find my friend.”

“I haven’t seen anyone,” he said. “I only saw you because I was scoping, and I spotted that red suit. You stand out in that red suit. Are you alone?”

I was at a loss as to what to say, how to answer, when I saw the round door on the tower open, and clearly a woman peaked out. She wore a coat, but not the hood.

“Larry, everything okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, fine. She’s safe. You’re letting the heat out. Get in.”

The door closed.

Larry. I guess that was his name.

“Come on in.” He moved to the door.

“I have to get back out and search.”

“A huh.” He nodded. “Alone. Right now? It’s gonna be dark in less than an hour. You don’t look like you’re from one of the camps. And from that flashy snow suit, I’m gonna guess you ain’t from around here. Come on in.” He reached for the door.

If Tony was with me, he’d say I was out of my mind. I had this habit of trusting people. The guy Larry could have shot me. If he wanted to harm me, I was an arm’s reach away. He kept his distance, spoke matter of fact. He wasn’t alone, there was a woman with him.

Possibly even more people. The thought did cross my mind that a man and woman duo took our Humvee. Obviously, it wasn’t them. Why would they take it to go a couple blocks? Plus, it wasn’t around anywhere. Unless Tony got it back and left me in Pittsburgh.

Trusting my gut instinct, which had failed me before, I followed Larry inside the submarine.

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Immediately I sensed the temperature change when walking into the submarine. I removed my hood and my goggles. Larry hung his

coat next to the door.

"Sections are cold. You'll get used to it, if you want to remove that stuff."

"I'm fine. Thank you."

He led the way, not waiting on me. I paused to look at the blue and gold sign that indicated 'control room' with an arrow. We walked down a set of narrow and steep stairs.

Larry told me to 'watch my step' and I did. It took us to the control room, or rather what used to be the control room. Most of the equipment was moved to make room for old bench seats.

Center of the room was a makeshift heater. It was made from a trash can with an exhaust tube that led up to the ceiling. The temperature changed when I walked in there and I undid my coat.

The woman sat in there, her blonde hair in a sloppy ponytail pulled to the side. A little girl, with the same color hair, no older than three perched on her lap. Still holding the child, she stood and extended her hand. "Gail," she said.

"Anna," I told her.

"Have a seat. Do you want something warm to drink?" she asked.

"I'm fine. Thank you. Is it just you three?"

Larry answered, "There's others. They're here and there. About twelve of us. Four are kids."

"That's amazing," I said with eyes that danced around the room. "You have a radio."

"Yeah, well, there was an entire room filled with them. We can't call out, only listen."

"You said you spotted me on the scope. Have you spotted anyone else around here?"

"No." He shook his head. "We caught you on the hourly. You were on top of that garage." He reached to the small pot on top of the heater and poured whatever was in the pot into a mug. "Sure you don't want something to drink."

"No, really I'm ..." I caught the aroma of the beverage, it smelled warm and fruity. "You know, maybe a little. That smells really good."

He handed me the mug. "Gail, here, made this fruit tea. We dehydrate the skins. Try it."

The first sip crossed my lips and stung from the heat, but I was able to enjoy the flavor. It was truly an ingenious thing. "You mentioned 'camps'. Do you mean around here in the city."

"All about the city. Small ones," he said.

Gail added, "A lot of people left though. Once the weather warmed up, they packed what they could and headed south. People remain though. Some waiting longer, some hoping this will pass and we can start a normal life."

"Is that what you're doing?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "We want to move out. Hopefully find Protocol One. It's around here somewhere."

Mid sip, my eyes lifted over the rim of the mug. "Protocol One?"

Larry pointed to the radio. "We pick them up, a couple other big bunkers, oddly named after apocalypse movies. But they are farther way. Protocol One is closer from what we gathered. Wish we had a way to communicate with them."

"How are you gonna get there?" I asked.

"Wait until the weather breaks, if it does and walk," Larry said. "Would help if we knew where they were. We're thinking Elwood City. Just by some of the locations that have been mentioned. If we could reach out, maybe get them to grab the kids at least. We're a good bunch of people," Larry said. "Have a lot to offer. I was maintenance for the museum here and did the upkeep on this sub. Gail is a nurse. We wouldn't be trouble. Not like what they had. We heard about that over the radio.

"Why do you want to join them?"

"Aside from them not sounding like a totalitarian so—"

I laughed, cutting him off.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing, please, go on. Just thinking of my friend."

"The radio guy is funny. It's the only entertainment we get. When they play those games, we try to play along."

I nodded and sipped my beverage.

"So are you or aren't you gonna tell us you're from Protocol One."

Slowly, I lowered the mug. "How did you know?"

"The fancy outfit. Mainly your voice. We listened to you every day for months. We know your voice. I recognized it as soon as you said a few words."

"I'm sorry," I said in a humble manner. "I'm just being careful. Please don't take offense."

"None taken. Who's lost?"

"Tony."

"Tony?" Larry said with shock. "How long?"

"He's been gone two hours."

Larry whistled. "What happened?"

"We were on a search, to gauge for survivors, actually Gil, who has taken over the control, needs more hands. Try to get an idea of how many, who we'll transport and so forth. Then when we were turning, someone cried for help. We stopped. Thank God we took our stuff from the Humvee, because it was a ruse. She yelled from one door of the casino that someone was hurt, we ran in and someone took the vehicle. I'm guessing she ran through and met them. Tony

decided to chase after and I haven't seen him since."

"Why would he chase them?"

"Because, I think, he believed he'd run to the front and catch up with her. I think he did because there were multiple footprints in the snow, then they got covered."

Larry stood. "It had to be Michael and Gina's crew. There's three of them." He looked at Gail. "What do you think?"

"Did you drive in from the West?" she asked.

"Actually, we came from the north taking the west ramp in. So yes." I replied.

"Has to be," Gail said. "They shelter in that building just off the ramp. Probably saw you coming in. Wasn't thought through. They wouldn't have time."

"Are they dangerous?" I asked.

Larry groaned in thought. "I want to say desperate. Ralph is. He is a short man with a short fuse. Was a lawyer or something. But whether they'd hurt him. I don't know."

Gail said, "Those who remain were those who were more prepared and could wait it out. Those three were the least prepared that we knew of. Didn't have enough to pilgrimage nor enough to stay. They've been asking around for food."

"Gotta whole city afoot," Larry added. "Doesn't make sense. Go out and salvage. We did." He poured himself some of the fruit beverage. "It'll be dark real soon. If you want, first light, I'll help you look for him tomorrow. We'll grab Horace make him check out Mike and Gina's place. We'll find Tony."

I didn't want to be dependant or ask for help, but I couldn't turn down Larry's offer. I was glad to have it, not for safety's sake but navigational purposes. His help would save me time and he knew the area much better than I did.

Though I felt defeated in not finding or knowing anything about Tony on the first day, I was confident I'd find the answers in the morning.

At the Bunker – Peter

I was happy for the visual distraction. The right side of my bottom lip bled from biting it. No one told me anything. On top of that, the space station sent new photos. It wasn't good. Before we sent out Anna and Tony, the gray cloud formation lingered between Minnesota and Northern Ohio. Had it taken the predicted course, it would have moved right on by us.

But it didn't. It swept down and stalled. The massive storm front moved across our area. But that wasn't the worst of it. The pretty picture of the earth wearing a snow beanie, quickly changed when the space station said they were watching massive cloud formations.

While I am not familiar with the terms, basically the arctic air was moving down and mixing with some sort of warm air, causing the cloud to produce more snow.

It could miss us and stay north.

For that we had to wait, wait to see what it did. The snow was already a hinder in getting Anna and Tony. But it did show signs of slowing down.

Tom and Skyler returned, they had trouble with the weather as well. Tom was anxious and wanted to go straight to Pittsburgh to find Tony. I wanted him to go, but Gil put the brakes on that.

"For as much as I want them back here, I can't afford to lose two more people," Gil stated. "We have what? Almost a foot of snow. Yes, we can make it there, but if the new storm hits, what are we getting, Peter?"

"They said about three feet maybe more."

"You'll get stranded too," Gil said with a point to Tom. "They have supplies, they'll be fine."

"You say 'they'," Tom argued. "We don't know where Tony is. We haven't heard from Anna in hours. I can make it there before the storm hits."

"Let me give it some thought. You won't get there tonight before nightfall anyhow. If the storm hasn't arrived by morning, maybe you can go out and try to beat it."

Tom thanked him. I didn't understand why. Why did we need Gil's permission? Gil operated under the guise that he made all decisions in the best interest of everyone. Had Anna not been out there with Tony, I would have assumed he just wanted Tony gone. But Anna was out there and that just tossed a wrench into my theory.

Then after more lip biting, the visual distraction appeared in the monitor.

Gwen.

Was she still, all these hours later, trying to clean herself? Her hair

was a mess, matted and wild. It made me laugh.

She took a seat in the dining area and kept looking at her watch. What was she waiting for? Her fingers tapped on the table and she appeared irritated.

“You can leave if you want,” Tom said. “I got this.”

“Yeah, but you’re gonna need rest if you go out,” I said. “Say, what do you think she’s up to?”

“Gwen? Who knows?”

“Here comes Nelly,” I pointed. “They’re talking. “ I watched Gwen’s lips move and I interpreted. “Gwen just said, ‘I bit my thigh.’”

“What?” Tom laughed.

“Yeah, and Nelly said, ‘Fur wart’”

“You are the worst lip reader I have ever known.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m sure that’s what she said. Oh,” I laughed. “Gwen just told her, ‘Canada uses wings.’”

“Oh my God.”

“Why is Nelly flipping her off? Oh, here comes Gil.”

“Why don’t you go down there and grab a drink or snack, then you can really find out what is being said.”

“You know what?” I stood. “That is a good idea. Need anything?”

“No thanks.”

I myself needed a break from the safe room. I was there all day waiting for news. I was divided between hopeful and gloomy. The gloom came when Melissa radioed that Joie, Tony’s daughter wanted to know when he was getting back, a normal question for a five year old. It was something I didn’t want to answer over the radio. Melissa came to the safe room and I told her.

Her exhale of worry carried out. Joie was in her care and she said it would stay that way if need be, at least until Anna, Tony or both returned. Melissa already had her hands full. She and her grandmother were caretakers for the baby found on the way to the bunker and the displaced kids that came in during what I like to call the fury.

The time period when temperatures soared. Had I not been working the radio so much, I probably would have taken Joie. She liked me. She and I were pals, at least I thought so.

Nelly and I crossed paths on the walkway that crossed between Pods A and B.

She looked irritated and was mumbling to herself.

“Don’t ask,” she said, holding up her hand.

“I don’t need to.”

“Oh, yeah, you are the watcher.”

“Yeah, I didn’t have the sound up, but I know whatever it was, it pissed you off.”

“She thinks we’re all her servants, her and I are gonna go round and round. I need a smoke.”

“Hey, Nel, you’re running low. You smoke now, that will be one less you’ll have when you run out in ... two weeks.”

“Is that all I have left?” she asked.

“Twenty-nine cigarettes, that’s it.”

“Fuck.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll steal a couple puffs from my evening smoke. What about bourbon, we good on that.”

“Yep, plenty.”

“That’ll do.”

She moved by me toward the main section or Pod as we started calling them. I whistled thinking about how bad Gwen had to be to cause Nelly to dig into her stash. Nelly typically had it together.

As I approached the dining area door, I could hear Gwen’s mouth. Her words were rushed and laced with anger. It was hard to make out what exactly she was saying, but it wasn’t pleasantries.

Nelly had made her homemade pudding cups for the kids. The aroma of warm chocolate flowed to me earlier that day, so I knew she made them. In fact, anything she cooked, I could smell in the safe room if the door was open.

I walked into the dining level pretending I was none the wiser, even though everyone knew I was the eyes and ears of the bunker. The kitchen portion was first, then the area where everyone ate. I likened it to an upgraded college cafeteria.

Pudding. Pudding. Fridge. I thought of my snack search.

“I don’t understand what his issue is,” Gwen said.

“Why is this my problem?” Gil asked.

“Are you not the leader here?”

Yes. There they are. Pudding. Wow. They look good.

“Not over matters like this,” Gil said. “These are up to the individual division leaders.”

Gwen laughed. “And you trust the mechanical division to a man named Duke.”

“Actually, yes.”

I wonder if Nelly made that whipped topping. Here is this ... no, that’s butter.

“Gilbert, please, this is important.

“Gwen, it isn’t.”

Yes! Got it. Wow, this is awesome.

“He is being a dictator,” Gwen stated.

Funny, I thought as I closed the fridge. Everyone has that thought about Gil. A dictator. Wait. One more thing. I wonder if there are any cold

ones. I opened the fridge again.

"He has rules," Gil stated. "And the rules make sense."

"But he took my hot air dryer and straightener."

"You weren't following the rules. He asked you not to use them. They are unnecessary," Gil argued.

Ah, yes. I grabbed one. *Cold, too, this will be really good.* I closed the fridge again and opened the drawer for a spoon.

"Look at my hair, Gil, are you gonna say they are unnecessary."

I didn't mean to, it slipped. I laughed and after I did, I noticed both Gwen and Gil stared at me.

Mouth hovering my pudding, I shrugged. "I was gonna compliment you on the look," I said to Gwen.

"Peter," Gil pointed. "Aren't those for the kids?"

"Yes and no. Nelly gives me permission."

"For the drink boxes, too?" Gil asked.

"Um, yeah, Joie hates them. I get her share and this is cold. So good." I set down my pudding to insert the tiny straw.

"Oh my God," Gwen lifted her eyes in a snubbing manner. "The caliber of people in this place. And you wonder why I want to do my hair, Gil. It adds civility"

"I second that motion," I lifted my spoon. "Something needs done with that hair."

"Peter," Gil warned softly.

"I was just saying. Maybe Gwen should do a ponytail?"

She huffed at me. "Why don't you go back to being Big Brother and suck a juice box."

"Ouch. Man. Why are you here if you hate it so much?" I asked.

"Because of my husband."

Pudding and drink box in hand, I laughed in sarcasm. "Is that why you have a separate room?"

"Peter can you just leave?" Gil asked. "I'll deal with you later."

"Thank you," Gwen said to him.

I didn't reply. *Deal with me later. That was insulting. Please.* I just walked out. I got my curiosity satisfied and heard what Gwen was talking about. Nothing important. In fact since she arrived she talked about nothing important.

Something just struck me as odd with her being at the bunker. She made a grand entrance with an entourage. Gwen came from a high end bunker to us. Maybe she did come for Gil. Maybe she only wanted to persuade him to leave. Whatever the case, it was worth looking into. Possibly try to find out why she was at Protocol One, because it just didn't sit right.

In the meantime, diversion was over. I returned to the safe room and it didn't take long until the humor from Gwen's expense faded

and I was watching the radio, waiting impatiently for Anna to get back to us. It had been too long. I needed to hear that she was alright, and also that Tony was, too.

EIGHT – TRIPLE SEVENS

Despite the open invitation and warm environment, I declined to stay at the submarine. I had to get back to the starting point, in case Tony returned. Both Gail and Larry understood, and did say that the area was safe. Although Tony vanishing just after the Humvee was stolen didn't do much to reiterate those sentiments.

It was still snowing, though it did let up a little. The waning sun was a white dot in the darkening sky, trying its hardest to peek through the clouds before it set for the night.

My footprints were partially covered, not all. The casino wasn't far from the sub and with how quiet it was I assured Larry and Gail, I'd blast my air horn if I needed anything. They offered me items like food and such, but I didn't need them, nor did I want to take what they had to survive. I knew what we packed was plenty and would get me through the night and longer.

I made my way back to the casino, and instead of entering through the main entrance, I went back to where I left the bag. There was still some light left, and I needed what remained when I went through the bags.

As soon as I stepped in, I searched out the lantern. It was battery operated, yet would give me a wider range of light. After I found that, lit it, I radioed Protocol One.

It was a bleak check in. I was fine, Tony was still missing, but I also notified Peter that I happened upon good people who would help me.

Gil was in the radio room and said, "There are no good people anymore, Anna, I thought by now you would know this."

I did. But Larry and Gail weren't in the bad category. After assuring them I was fine and I'd check in first thing in the morning, I powered down the radio and began planning my night.

The multitudes of bags were packed with a lot of items. I didn't want to waste time going through everything, so I took what I knew I needed and placed it in one bag. It was probably more than I had to take, but once I settled, I didn't want to have to go back to the bags.

I did, however, move the bags more inside the casino and away from the doors.

First thing was warmth. The Arctic Armor kept me cozy, but I needed it for outside. I didn't want my body temperature to adjust to wearing it.

Having been a waitress, my mind went to the kitchen. I doubted a city code allowed independent gas lines, but I was certain there was more than likely a grill.

My explorations of the casino resulted in a lot of finds and I didn't even look too hard.

The bars were not ransacked and there was a cigarette machine, a big one with ridiculously high priced cigarettes, It was still intact, glass blackened, yet unbroken.

My thoughts went to Nelly and how she was running low on her stash. I would make it a point to grab her a few packs if they hadn't burned out from the heat wave. More than likely they'd be stale, but would Nelly care once she ran out?

There were three restaurants. One of them was more of a fast food type place, the other was encased in glass and locked up, but the third was wide open and not far from the main entrance.

I slipped into the kitchen, and as I thought, there was a Grill. I turned the control on the huge propane tank, heard the hiss and nearly lit it, but stopped. If I ended up stranded, I would need that propane. So I thought of another option.

A small space with a little heat would go a long way, but I didn't want to sink too far into the casino. Instead, I decided I would make an indoor camp right near the front main doors. I grabbed a rack from the convection oven, a cake pan, and a soup kettle, and a long meat fork to use as my fire poker.

I brought the kitchen items and the rest of my stuff to the open area of the main entrance. Thinking back to when Jackson was a kid, and all the fast forts we made, using chairs from the casino floor, I made a partial tent right by the far right doors, draping a Mylar blanket over them. I didn't unroll my sleeping bag all the way, I doubted I'd sleep fully.

The floor was marble which worked in my favor. I placed the oven rack on the floor, the cake pan upside down on it and the kettle rested on the cake pan. For ventilation, I'd prop open the door.

I had the means to 'light' a fire, but I needed the means to keep it going.

The security guard podium.

In a world where everyone searched for items to burn, the overturned podium was overlooked. I knocked on it and it was solid and plywood. Good enough.

I had grabbed the small hatchet from our gear and used that to break some of it down. Not a lot, chopping that podium wasn't as easy as I thought. It took more strength than I had, and hoped what I did salvage was enough. A few pieces of wood. When I wasn't so physically worn and mentally exhausted, I'd attack that podium again. I took what I had to my door camp and would burn one piece at a time. It was cold in the casino, but I was sure what I had in mind would provide enough heat.

I still needed something to get the wood to catch. Lantern in my hand, I spotted the slot machine closest to me. It wasn't a video slot; it was an older reel one. Even though it was not lit up, I could still see the reels. Ironically, some lucky person hit triple sevens before the world ended. Stepping closer to it, I saw the words, 'insert money or ticket here' and immediately I thought 'paper'. Paper burned.

Using the hatchet, I attacked that slot machine until it opened. Sure enough, not only was there a stack of blank vouchers into here, but bills as well.

I could get my fire started.

That slot machine ended up not only being lucky for the last person that played, it but it paid out for me as well.

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I opted for vodka figuring it had the least likelihood of being ruined by the drastic change in temperatures. It tasted fine, but then again, I was tired.

It had gotten dark and before I settled for the night, whether it was smart or not, I stepped outside into the open, and using the flare gun, I shot off a flare.

It rose high into the clouded sky, painting the clouds a burning pink. I needed to send a signal to Tony. Maybe he'd see it and know I was waiting on him. Knowing Tony he'd yell at me for using the wrong colors. He told me what each color meant, but it escaped me at that moment.

My soup kettle fire burned nicely and bright enough that I didn't need the lantern. The smoke flowed out the propped open door. To me, like the flare, the orange glow was another beacon that perhaps Tony would see.

Arctic Armor removed, I wrapped the sleeping roll around me, sipped on the vodka while nibbling on a ration bar. My body felt as if it weighted five hundred pounds. My legs were achy, my head hurt, and my mind raced. Eventually I'd doze off, that couldn't be helped. However, I doubted I'd slip into that shut down sleep that my body needed. I couldn't. My mind raced with far too many thoughts.

I thought of Joie. She was so young, and even though she was smart for her age, she wouldn't understand. She had to wonder where we were, where her father was.

Her sixth birthday was in less than a month, yet, her father, the only family member she had in the world was missing. How could I return without him? What would I tell her?

Never finding Tony was not an option. Not in my mind or in my heart. He was out there, I knew it. He was alive, I sensed it.

And as I sat by the fire, digging into my best instincts, I knew
Tony was also in trouble.
I felt it.

Nine – Spread out

March 2

The last radio transmission to Protocol One was short but informative. I knew the radio wouldn't remain powered for long. The indicator light blinked, so before anything was said by them in our dawn conversation, I spewed out what I had to.

"When this radio dies, if you need to give me info, keep announcing it. The Sub shelter has one that receives. I haven't found Tony. Please don't tell Joie. I am fine. I start my search today."

It was a mental list I rattled and then after, I said, 'over', Gil replied, "There's a storm. A big one. We're watching it. Tom is preparing now. If it doesn't hit, he'll be there by noon. If it does ... it may be another day or two because this is supposed to dump a ton. Over."

"Gil, do not let him come here if the weather is bad. We don't need more of us stranded."

"My thoughts exactly."

"I'm fine. I really am fine. I'd rather have him and Duke work on a plowing mechanism instead of daring the roads."

"Roger, than, I'll convey and make..."

That was it. Communication lost.

I didn't fret over that much; at least the sub would be able to pick up their transmissions. A storm was coming, I did need to know about that. Another storm would surely cover any clues that Tony left behind.

Maybe we'd be lucky and find him beforehand.

Larry arrived just after eight. I expected him earlier, but the sun was out, and that was a good sign. It beat hard through the windows of the casino. He wasn't dressed for a long scouting mission in the snow. He wore blue jeans, a knit cap and his coat was one of those tan canvass jackets, not very warm.

"Horace went to Mike's," he said. "No one was there. Very little was gone. No sign that they lit their heater last night. I'm gonna say they saw that Humvee and took it on a whim."

"So you do think it was them?"

"I'm gonna say yes, since they aren't around. We'll know more when we go searching. Hit the other camps and shelters."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Anyone can be dangerous if put in that position," Larry said. "But I don't know them to be dangerous. The folks that remained, like I said, either had enough to wait it out or not enough to make the pilgrimage. In both cases, the ones that stayed, we all need each other."

Our problems left when the pilgrimage did.”

“Well, somebody is dangerous.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Tony’s gone,” I said.

“We’ll find him.”

“There’s a possibility of a storm coming, a big one.”

“Yeah, I saw the clouds to the north. So we better get a move on.

Horace is out. Figured we’d cover more ground that way.”

“Thank you.”

Larry nodded and began to walk.

“Wait, before we go. We’ll be out there a while. I don’t want you quitting because of the weather.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Just in case.” After signaling to him to give me a moment, I walked over to the pile of bags, reached into the one, pulled out Tony’s Arctic Armor and handed it to him.,

“What’s this for?”

“You said you weren’t gonna quit,” I told him. “Just say this is my insurance.”

TEN – TOXIC

One would think that I handed Larry and steak and lobster dinner. That was how excited he was about wearing the Arctic Armor. He gloated about the suit immediately. As soon as we stepped outside, he commented that he didn't feel a shift in temperature and wished he had the suit when things were really cold.

We took a different route than I had taken the previous day. This time we walked away from the river.

After telling him where I last left the car, Larry estimated that Mike, if he were indeed the one who took it, had to turn around, back track and take a two block detour around the overpass that fell during the earthquake.

"There is no way, Hummer or not, he was getting through that. Even River Road is blocked. Nope, he had to go around. Get to Ridge Avenue which is pretty clear, then back down after the stadium to where Reedsdale is clear again."

"Reedsdale is?"

"The road that runs perpendicular on the other side of the casino. It's blocked by that overpass."

"What about the woman?"

"We know this area, Anna," he said. "My guess is they were meeting up on Ridge or close to it. She ran through the casino, out the front door. She had to go around the garage, which meant running down Casino Drive towards River Road or taking Reedsdale, on foot that's possible. But by what you told me, Tony went that way, so she took the long way."

"Which is why the footprints went off."

"So more than likely ..." He pulled out a map, showing me. "She ran around the stadium, taking the long route to get to Mike. Knowing Mike, he came looking for her if she was taking too long. He may have parked and left the vehicle, and ran on foot. Who knows? There are a lot of different scenarios."

"If he shut it off he won't get it started, key or not."

"Why's that?"

"It's a coded ignition."

Larry whistled. "Man, you government people."

"I'm not government."

"Just the ex-husband?" Larry chuckled.

Larry and Gail knew all about Gil and the bunker, it was part of the conversation we had at that first meeting in the sub.

We walked down the street called Reedsdale and not only did cars block it, but the wreckage from the overpass extended all the way

down. It was apparent that it buckled and fell. The concrete extended nearly to the stadium. The snow covered and camouflaged a lot of the debris, making my footing difficult. Numerous times I nearly tripped or bumped into something I didn't see.

As soon as we arrived at the stadium, Larry moved in the direction of the sports complex.

"Is this a camp?" I asked.

"Yeah, it became one."

"Only mentioned there was supposed to be an underground shelter."

"Not on this side of the river. This area was kind of forgotten." He dropped it at that, we had arrived at a set of double doors, a back entrance and Larry opened the one door. He waited for me to enter first, then I allowed him to pass and I followed.

After removing our hoods, Larry lit a flashlight as we moved down the blackened hallway to another door. When he opened it, it took me back.

We emerged into the large belly hallway of the stadium. Tents were set up in an organized manner, fires burned in cans. The openness of the hallway provided enough ventilation.

I was the freak figure that stood out and people all paused in what they were doing to look at me. Some cooked, others just sat and talked. Some stood by the fire. There were so many people.

I realized how different I looked, how untouched by the events I appeared in comparison to those living in the stadium.

Larry led the way, saying hello to people as he passed them. "John Carver runs this camp," he said, "He's up there."

He pointed to an older man who stood by his own fire can outside of a tent. He didn't wear a coat, just a hat. He was thick, but that could have been the layers of clothes.

John Carver laughed and shook his head, extending his hand to Larry. "Look at you all fancy in blue."

"It's warm," Larry said. "We sure could have used this two weeks ago when we were out."

"Tell me about it." Carver tipped his chin. "Who's your friend?"

"Carver, this is Anna Jenner. She's from The Protocol One camp."

"You don't say." Carver extended his hand to me. "You part of a rescue movement."

"More of a search right now," I replied. "Once the weather breaks we..."

"And I keep telling her it's not breaking soon," Larry interrupted me.

I found his interruption odd and made a mental note to ask him about it.

Larry continued. "She's searching for her friend. They pulled over to help someone and their vehicle was stolen. Her partner went after them and now he's lost."

"How long?" Carver asked.

I answered. "A day."

"He could have gotten discombobulated," Carver said. "If you don't know the city, there really aren't any solid landmarks. He may be lost."

Larry said, "Or hurt."

"Or both," Carver said. "You running the camps on the North Shore?"

"That's the plan," Larry replied, "Horace has taken the ones up by Campus."

"Well, we haven't had any strangers here," Carver said. "What brought you out of your cozy bunker anyhow?" he asked me.

Before I could answer Larry did, "Scouting mission. They wanted to see how far the ice was headed. Alright, we're heading out. We appreciate your help. Her people say there's a storm coming, big one, too. Buckle down."

Carver nodded. "Good luck."

Larry placed a hand on my back to turn and guide me.

"Larry," Carver called out. "If you're going down to the row, can you stop in the Mitchell place? Usually one of them kids pops by for something and I haven't heard or seen them in days."

"Sure thing."

We said our goodbyes, I thanked Carver and walked away with Larry.

"Who are the Mitchells?" I asked.

"Family that has a shelter in an old concert place. We'll pass it. I was gonna stop there anyhow."

Once we were free from earshot of the camp and safely in the dark hallway again, I asked Larry. "Why did you cut me off and not let me speak back there?"

"It's not a macho thing or man thing." He lifted his hood and opened the door.

In the moments we were inside, the sky grew gloomy again.

Larry looked up. "I just don't want you giving too much information. I trust Carver, it's those around that can hear I don't trust. Just keep your plans to yourself. Don't think they'll hurt you, but they sure as shit will want what you have if they think you got anything. Right now, they probably think whoever took off with your Humvee made off with all your stuff. Keep it that way."

"I appreciate the heads up."

"Sure thing. It's a little walk to the next section." Larry pointed.

"It's also the area where Gina would have ran to meet Mike."

"If they took it."

"They took it. Unless it's the Mitchells." Larry said. "Since they haven't been seen either. Can't see how they'd see you coming though. Unless one of their teenagers was out running about and they saw you."

"Do you know everyone in this area?"

"This area yeah. Other side of Ridge Avenue are a few camps. Beyond that we don't know. This whole area was the forgotten zone. No one really thought about it after the hit. I mean, I did. I thought of the sub right away."

"Because you worked there?"

"Yep. I mean, when they announced the comet, things went crazy. Everything shut down. A huge exodus happened. I kept thinking where are they going. But it was south because of this." He pointed around then looked up. "They said the next ice age. North especially. I think they were thinking ahead."

"You didn't leave."

"No. I followed the plan. That's where I met Gail and the others."

"You aren't married?"

Larry shook his head. "And I am glad now I never did or didn't have kids."

"What was the plan?"

"The plan was for people to go to underground garages, the subway. I wasn't really seeing the need for it until someone on the radio talked about the heat that would come. I had supplies at my house and I loaded two big duffle bags. My intention was to settle, then go out before the heat hit, if it did. The comet came, all lights went out. Then we had that earthquake, and the ashes came. It was when the heat arrived that people really started hitting the shelters. We were told there would not be supplies in any shelter that wasn't a FEMA shelter."

"You had your own."

"I did. So I didn't worry. I'd ration my water, I'd be good. I guess the government started stocking things before the announcement. I didn't go to a FEMA shelter, I went to the tallest building in the city. It had five subbasement levels. Third sub basement had the water tanks. And we shut them down. There was about sixty of us there. A lot of folks brought their own supplies. We were good. A lot of people were not deep enough. Even though the city was pretty much spared from the fireballs."

"So why did you leave there?"

"The cold was coming. Didn't want to get stuck frozen underground. We worked out a plan, knew we had to get to an

isolated spot with buildings we could heat and get in and out of. Carver actually brought up the stadium and I thought about the sub. Hoping, you know, it had the igloo effect once the cold came. We ventured out just as the sky started to darken. I couldn't tell you how many bodies were cooked on the streets. It smelled bad, and it was horrible for the kids. When we got over this way, we realized it was barren. The buildings around here had a lot of supplies, we did it. We survived. Far too many didn't survive the cold. We saw that when the temperatures rose a little and we ventured out. One large surviving community. I'll tell ya, though ..." he whistled. "That darkness, oh my God, it was scary. You couldn't see debris or bodies. It was just scary."

I wanted to respond, to comment, but the truth was, I just didn't know what to say. Immediately I was wracked with guilt over how horrible they'd had it, how rough. I was fortunate and spared of so much.

"Ah," Larry said. "Up ahead. See that overpass. That is the road Gina would have ran up to meet Mike."

I started to look, but then he changed direction and pointed to the building directly ahead.

"That's the Mitchell place."

It was across a small lot surrounded by a wall and partial fence. A huge gray building that blended in with the snow and the cloudy weather. It had red posts to a huge awning and next to that the letters AE. It started snowing, not light flakes, but huge soft ones. It was steady. The storm wasn't passing us.

Here we go again, I thought. Then I noticed Larry had stopped walking. "What is it?"

"Something's wrong."

I noticed immediately, the building looked deserted. No tracks in the snow. But more than that. "No smoke."

"Yep. No smoke. No fire. No fire ... no heat." He began walking again, only this time he picked up the pace.

I kept up, never once did he tell me to stay back. I pulled my gun, just in case of trouble and safety on, I placed it in my front coat pocket.

We made our way up the snow covered side staircase, another sign that something was off. The metal steps were slippery and I had to grasp the railing. Once on the landing, Larry knocked on the door.

After there was no answer, he pounded, calling out. "Greg? Vickie?"

A few more pounds and he reached for the door handle. I turned and Larry pushed forward. He coughed once when he stepped in sighed with a grunt of frustration.

"What? What is it?"

“Smell that?” Larry asked. “That’s chemical. Something was burned that shouldn’t be.”

“You think they ran out?”

“Let’s hope.”

There was enough daylight coming from the small frosted windows that we didn’t need a flashlight. It was quiet, eerily quiet and ice cold.

Blankets hung as a makeshift wall, and Larry parted them, stepping into the area and groaning out, “Oh my God.”

They had curtained off a home. A kitchen table, some chairs. By that a counter top propped on wood. There were cans of food, packages of dehydrated stuff as well. Toys scattered on the floor, by the two leather chairs and a homemade wood burning stove was center of it all. On the other side, two beds crammed together.

The Mitchell family hadn’t left.

They were all in bed, the older children on one bed, the youngest snuggled between the parents. They were covered with blankets but what skin was exposed was a pale crystallized blue.

It hit me. Struck me hard and it was a scene too hard for me to handle. It was all too reminiscent of the family we saw that had frozen to death in the back of the store in Elwood City.

Families.

Wanting desperately to be together, trying their hardest to stay alive and despite all their best efforts, they still died.

What was more horrible than their death is what they endured before they succumbed. It wasn’t lack of trying, they tired. The Mitchell’s, the family in the Elwood store.

Again I started to feel the guilt of my survival. Had I not been privileged, would that have been me and Jackson? Huddled together, trying to stay warm, and dying because we were just too cold to think correctly or we didn’t know.

I was fully aware what had become of our world, desolation, the barren and cold frozen cities, I could handle. Death ... I could not. I would never get used to seeing it I would not allow myself to become numb to those who died.

As much as it bothered me, hurt to see, I welcomed the pain as a reminder that I was still human. That I was still able to feel.

Leaving Larry inside, I raced outside, and as I barreled down the stairs, I lost my footing and slid down the last half of the staircase. The snow somewhat cushioned my fall, but it still hurt. Lifting, up I moaned out as a pain shot down my right leg. It wasn’t broken, I hit my lower back.

Walk it off. Walk it off, I told myself and moved forward. I stomped in the snow, pouting like a child, irritated by my fall and

upset over the death of a family I did not know.

“Anna,” Larry called. “You all right?”

I looked over my shoulder behind me. He was walking down the stairs. “Yeah, I just ...” I swung out my arm in frustration and turned. “Fell. I’ll be ...” Had I not been standing in that spot away from the stairs. Had I not spun my body at just the right angle, I would never have seen it.

And even then it was just a glimpse.

I ran closer to the wall and through the fence.

“Anna!” Larry yelled. “What is it?”

On the street by the overpass, the one that Larry guessed would be Gina’s route, it was there.

Partially hidden by the snow, it blended in so well, it could have been an optical illusion. But it wasn’t. Two blocks up the road, to the side, maybe abandoned or even crashed.

It was our Humvee.

ELEVEN – SLICK SPOT

The snow on the road had thickened and hardened from the temperature drop, and the new snow flew up like dust as Larry and I raced across the parking lot to the street.

The whole run I kept thinking, Let that be it. Please let that be it and not some pile of rubble.

It was the Humvee.

The front end of the Humvee faced us at an angle, off to the left side of the road, resting just before the overpass near a building. The grill of the vehicle a mere inches from a steel pillar. It was covered in a thick layer of snow and its white body just blended in.

From first view it looked fine, just buried in snow and I ran. Larry was faster and made it there before me. Then again, in my haste, my foot caught something, and I tripped. The fall sent me a foot forward and stumbling to the ground. I gathered myself, would worry about any injuries later and got to the Humvee.

“This it?” Larry asked.

“Yeah, yeah, it is.” I caught my breath and started to clear the snow with my hands.

“Doesn’t look wrecked,” Larry said, walking around. “I don’t see damage. What the hell? Maybe it caught debris.”

“Check the tires,” I said and cleared the driver’s window. It was empty inside.

“All good. Odd.”

“So is this.” I opened the door. “It was just abandoned. Are there any camps nearby?”

“Actually, right there.” He said with a point. “The M Station has a small one.”

I looked quickly, then back inside. “The keys are still in the ignition.”

“Can you get it started? Do you know the code?”

“Yeah, I do.” Hand resting on the door frame, I bit my lip. What had happened? “I’ll give it a try. If it starts we can get the radio working or charge Gwen’s ...”

“Son of a bitch.”

Larry’s sudden blast of angry profanity caught my attention, I stepped back and looked. Larry bolted toward another person. That man turned and like a professional wrestler, Larry hurled himself in the air, spearing the individual to the ground.

Before I could react and find out what was going on, Larry lifted the man by the scruff of his coat and dragged him my way. It happened so fast, I had a hard time registering it. He slammed the

man against the side of the Humvee.

"What... what's going on?" I asked.

"This is Mike."

A peep of a groan seeped from my throat in my shock. This Mike looked like a kid. Maybe twenty or so, not much older than Jackson. He was thin with grown out brown hair and he looked scared.

Larry slammed him again. "Did you take this vehicle?"

Mike didn't speak, he muttered out sounds. Fearful sounds.

"Answer me!" Larry ordered.

Scared and almost weepy, Mike answered. "Yes. We saw them coming. We didn't mean harm. We just ..." his head lowered. "We thought there were more. They wouldn't miss it."

It was overwhelming and I tried to catch my breath, I asked calmly. "There was a man who chased after Gina. Did you see him?"

Mike's head bobbed, as if he was crying. He seeped out a 'Yes'.

"Oh my God." My hand shot to my mouth.

"What happened?" Larry asked hard.

"I didn't mean ... I was coming to get Gina. I didn't mean to. I swear to God, I didn't mean to. I hit a slick spot when I turned. I lost control. I didn't mean to." Immediately his head dropped farther and he started to cry.

"Didn't mean to do what?" Larry questioned.

I was scared of the answer, I truly was. My ears rushed with blood and heart raced.

Then he said, "I hit them."

My eyes closed instinctively and I reached for the Humvee for support.

Mike continued, "The man was with her. Holding her arm. I saw them, I couldn't stop."

Grasping his coat, Larry slammed his again. "Where are they?"

Slowly and shaking, he raised his arm and pointed behind me.

Oh my God, I had tripped over something and never bothered to see what it was. I ran back to the spot, clearly marked by the scuffed snow and saw it. When I tripped, my boot removed snow from the mound, exposing a small black spot. I dropped to my knees scared to death to uncover the mound. It was hard and solid. One sweep of my glove over the snow, exposed an arm, then a hand.

I knew by the fingers it wasn't Tony, it couldn't be. The blue gloves were partially off, the hand was dainty. Diligently, I removed more snow and saw the white and frost covered face of a young woman. Her eyes were wide open, lacking color, it seemed as if frozen blood laced her skin. Her cap was like a Popsicle, icy, red, it was glued by the elements to the left side of her head. It was obviously she suffered a horrible head injury.

I looked over my shoulder. "It must be Gina."

Larry was angry, I could hear it. See it. Immediately, I started searching for another mound. I just wanted to cry and scream.

"You just left her there?" Larry yelled.

"I had to. I had to get him help."

Stop.

I stood and looked at Mike.

"He was still alive. Hurt. He was hurt bad. But still alive. I knew Gina wasn't. I had to get him help." Mike said. "I took him to Tim's. He was unconscious. I had to carry him. I had to leave her."

"Tim's?" I questioned.

"Right there. The M Station," Larry replied.

We had taken only a few steps to go there, when Mike stopped us.

"He's not there. That's why I'm out here," Mike said. "When he woke up he left. They sent me after him."

"Did he say anything?" I asked.

"Just said he had to find her," Mike replied. "He's still sick. He's still bleeding. I lost the trail of blood. The snow covered it."

Larry asked. "How long ago?"

"Half hour maybe. That's all."

Larry spun to me. "Bet he went back to the Casino. The Humvee doesn't look stuck. This is our best bet to look for him."

"It's not stuck," Mike said. "I just stopped it."

I raced back to the Humvee and to the open river's door. Larry ran around and got in the passenger's side, as I slid it.

"But it won't start!" Mike yelled. "It's broken. I..."

I punched in the four digit code, and turned the ignition. It started with ease and I shut the door. I didn't hear what Mike said and failed to pay any more attention. After adjusting the seat, I back it up, turned the wheel, and after making sure I was clear of not hitting Gina's remains, I cautiously pulled forward.

We headed to the casino as our first stop. If he wasn't there, he was somewhere en route. We would find him.

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Just as we passed the stadium, Larry suggested that I stop and drop him off. It was obvious we missed or crossed paths with Tony. He was on foot and injured, it was possible that Carver's people spotted him or, God forbid, Tony had collapsed.

We didn't know what injuries he had, we assumed a head injury because he was unconscious, other than that we were in the dark. As soon as we located him, Larry said he'd get Gail. She was the best bet for medical attention and the area's go to person for help. I felt better

about the fact we found the Humvee, if we failed at the radio, I would charge Gwen's phone.

It was a plan.

It took only minutes to crunch through the snow and make it to the valet area of the main entrance. I pulled the Humvee close to the doors, shut off the ignition and locked it.

Focus forward, I opened the door and raced in. What was it with me and being clumsy? I ran and three steps into the marble floored entrance, my foot caught it and I careened forward in a slide, before losing my footing and slamming hard to the ground.

My teeth pressed against my bottom lip, forming the 'F' to blurt out, when I saw what I slid on. It wasn't water, it was blood.

Panicked I lifted my head, fumbled for my flashlight and called out. "Tony?"

"An ... Anna."

His call was weak and breathy.

I gasped out, hurried to my feet and aimed my flashlight. When I did, I saw the trail of blood. It wasn't a lot, but enough droplets to make a path.

Finally, my beam caught him.

Four rows of slot machines down, Tony was seated on the floor, holding onto a chair for support.

Heart beating out of control, filled with worry and gratefulness, I ran to him.

At the Bunker – Peter

Well, that didn't go as planned. That was exactly what I thought in my first few moments in the dining area just before lunch. I had it mapped out in my head, the 'Attack on the Gwen'.

Maybe not so much an attack, but more so a way to find out what the heck she was up to. I couldn't wait until Anna got back, because I was certain she and I were thinking the same thing about her.

She paced around like a spoiled princess. Though she didn't look it with that hair. Her hair, it was my key to open the doorway to a better communication.

It didn't go as I thought.

"Why?"

It took all I had not to laugh. "Why?"

She folded her arms and tilted her head. "I will repeat ... why?"

The laugh burst out. "Sorry." I swiped my hand over my mouth. "Have you seen your hair?"

She exhaled heavily and tried to get by me. To which I stopped her.

"Look," I said, "I just feel really bad. It feels like they are torturing you on purpose. If you look good, you'll feel good, right."

"But why would you do that for me?" she asked. "What's in it for you?"

It was a pause, and honestly, I was thinking of how to phrase it. But all that came out of my mouth was the word, "Well," and she grunted in disgust, pushed me aside and stormed off.

I *think* she thought I wanted sex in exchange for getting her the hair straightener. Not sure, but I think that's what she believed my 'Well' to be about. Because, let's face it, a simple 'Well' all by itself is not reason to storm off.

All was not lost. Nelly, as she always did, had just given the kids their lunch trays. Seeing the trays was reminiscent of my school days and the lunch lady concoctions. She served the kids first, a complete and balanced lunch and then the adults got their food. Never balanced and rarely as nicely presented as the kids' meals.

Except for me. I got a kid tray sans the drink box. It was toasted sandwich day and I took a spot next to Joie. She fiddled with her food, and looked kind of down, understandably so.

"Hey," I said to her as I sat. "Toasted egg."

"Eggs are boring now." She lifted her juice box and placed it on my tray. "Is that tea?"

"Yep." I gave her my cup of hot tea. "And ... to sweeten the deal, when Nelly breaks open the pickles she's been fermenting, you can have mine."

Her little eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Really."

"Oh, I'll trade a juice box for a pickle any day."

"And they are all part of the fruits and vegetables family." I looked around then placed the drink box in the front pocket of my tee shirt. "So, what's happening little one? Why so glum?"

"Seriously?" she asked.

"Your dad?"

"And Anna." She sighed. "I'm worried. No one will tell me anything except they are stuck."

"They are. And ... they lost the Humvee. But shh, don't tell anyone."

Joie shifted left to right looking around.

"What?" I asked.

"Gwen is gonna be so mad."

"I know."

Joie giggled.

"There you go. And don't worry. They'll be back soon. If not you're stuck with me." I ran my hand over her head.

We talked for a little bit more, but I didn't want to stay too long, not just in case she asked one more question, but also because I didn't want anyone to see me with that juice box. I got hell every time someone saw me drinking one.

After my sandwich, I told Joie to find me any time she needed to talk, and I left for the safe room.

As soon as I stepped outside, I stuck the straw in my juice and sipped en route. Tom wouldn't say anything to me, of that I was sure. However, as soon as I approached the door, I heard voices.

Not one to back off of eavesdropping, I listened.

"Come on." Duke said. "It's the only way."

Tom's voice was next. "Guys, really, it doesn't make sense."

"No," Spencer said. "It makes perfect sense. If you go do the rescue, Gil will know you left. If Duke and I go, no one will notice at first."

"Plus," Duke added. "Both Spence and I are good at driving in the snow. We'll take the heavy truck. The base of it is higher than our accumulation. Or we'll take the plow."

Was I hearing right? Was two thirds of our over sixty population wanting to pull a Delta Force and sneak out to get Tony and Anna?

That was cool.

Pretending I didn't hear, I stepped inside. "Oh, hey guys. What's up?"

The safe room wasn't very big and Spencer and Duke stood off to the side not to be seen by anyone passing by.

Tom looked over his shoulder at me. "Really, Pete? I heard you slurping outside. You heard."

"Only a little." I sat at my desk. "Snow just started. If they take supplies in case they get stuck, they should be good."

"Exactly," Duke said. "I have some sawdust. And we can do this. We have the fuel. We just made that run. Spencer and I have it planned out. We know how to go, what to do. We have everything ready. We want to do this. We need to do this."

Tom groaned. "You guys are killing me. You know I have the keys. I'm not authorized to give them out."

Spencer waved out his hand. "Say we decked you. Knocked you out and took them. We are the best rescue team to go in there."

"What about him?" Tom pointed.

"They hit me, too." I sipped my drink.

"No. No." Tom shook his head. "I can't with a good conscience let you guys go without a really good reason."

Duke waved out his hand. "Tony missing and Anna being alone isn't good enough?"

"It is, but not enough to risk your lives as well."

At that moment, the radio hissed and Anna called out, shocking me so much, I choked on my drink.

"Protocol One come in. Protocol One, this is Anna. You read?"

I was the closest and I grabbed the radio. "Anna, we're here. I thought your radio died. Over."

"It did. I found the Humvee. Over."

"And Tony?" I asked.

"Oh my God, Pete, he's hurt. He's hurt bad," she said. I heard the desperation in her voice. "I don't know if he'll make it if we don't get him help."

Before responding, I turned my chair and looked at Tom. "Good enough reason yet?"

A beat and breath later, Tom unlocked the second to bottom drawer, reached in and pulled out a set of keys. He tossed them to Duke. "Take the plow. And get a med kit from Craig."

Duke gushed a, "Thank you" Before he and Spencer rushed out.

I clenched my fist with an excited, 'yes' and grabbed the radio. "Hold tight, Anna. Help is on the way."

TWELVE – FALLEN

My grateful reunion with Tony was overshadowed by the fact that I just wanted to scream and cry. The usually strong and unwavering man was weakened by injuries. So many, that I didn't know where to start. I couldn't leave him. I had to get him off of that cold floor, but the second he saw me, he slipped back out of consciousness as if he had been holding on for the moment he could see for himself I was fine.

It was obvious that the M Station camp tried to clean him up. I didn't recognize the clothes he wore, yet they had blood on them. His head was wrapped in a loose bandage that kept slipping. If ever there was a poster child for a person hit by a Humvee, Tony was it.

Larry arrived about fifteen minutes later. Maybe longer, it was irrelevant, because I was at a loss at what to do.

I wanted to move Tony, but he insisted I wait until he got Gail. "A few minutes. That's all. We'll be right back."

He got the lantern for me and placed it near Tony on the floor for light.

It didn't take long for Gail to return with some medical supplies. During her examination, I called Protocol One for help. I wanted nothing more than to put Tony in the back of the Humvee and try to get him home, but it started snowing really badly. That actually made me wonder if help would arrive.

It needed to arrive.

Gail had medical knowledge and was good, but as she said, "I don't have what I need to help him."

"Were you able to figure out what all is wrong?"

Gail rubbed her own forehead. "Obviously, he has a head injury. It looks to me that it could be a fractured skull. He has three cracked ribs, a broken wrist, and he has that gash on his side. I set the wrist temporarily and sutured him as best as I could. There may be internal injuries. It's hard to say because he has that gash on his side. He's lost a lot of blood, that's our biggest concern."

"What do you need?" I asked.

"He needs blood," Gail said. "Unfortunately, I can't do that."

Larry asked. "Can I? Can I run to General and get supplies?"

"You could," Gail replied. "But with this weather, *can you* is the question. Plus, we don't know what they have left." She then looked at me. "Didn't you say your people were coming?"

"They're trying," I said. "But I don't know if they'll make it with the weather."

"We can't take a chance sending Larry out. Even with your

Humvee. He needs someone that knows what to get to go with him.”

“So we’re at a loss.” I lifted my hands. “What about pain medication?”

“We have to be careful about that. He’s out again, so he’s not feeling pain. Warmth and rest. I’ll keep checking on him. If he looks worse tomorrow, we’ll make the trip to General.”

“Tomorrow?” I asked.

“Anna,” Gail said calmly. “He survived the hit, was unconscious, woke up and walked here. This is one very strong man.”

I nodded. She was right. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“If you believe in prayer, it might not be a bad thing to do.”

Pray.

We were at a loss medically. Hindered by not only the elements but by the lack of supplies. We couldn’t move him to the Humvee or even out of the Casino. What was best for Tony was to be stationary.

It was a wait and see. And I would wait and see, right next to Tony.

That’s all I could do.

THIRTEEN – TYPE B

Before he left, Larry helped me set up my camp near the main doors of the casino. We used draperies to make a closed in tent, and pillow cushions from sofas in the lounge to make a bed for Tony.

My kettle pot fire worked like a charm in the small space. There was just enough ventilation for airflow, yet it didn't hinder the warmth.

Cold was good. Gail said it would slow any bleeding down. I stayed wrapped in a blanket while Tony didn't move.

As promised, after two hours Gail returned.

Unfortunately, she believed Tony had slipped into a coma, and there was nothing we could do.

I just wanted to go home.

Back to the bunker and get him help. I hadn't eaten and only sipped on that fruit tea that Gail brought over. I was so extremely grateful for Larry, Gail and their crew. They were a Godsend. Having nothing, yet they shared with me. I would never forget them.

I owed them. Even though they dismissed my praise and claimed it to be unwarranted. They would do what any person would do.

Was that correct?

I firmly believed and held onto that belief that people were good. That the good would outnumber the bad. I was ridiculed for thinking that and actually, with the theft of the Humvee was rather humbled in my thinking. But Larry and Gail brought a restoration to all that. At least a little.

I went out to the Humvee and made contact with Peter.

"They left hours ago, Anna," Peter said. "Weather is bad. How much snow did you get there?"

"Over two feet. You?"

"Same."

"I wish I could tell you more. They'll get there."

"How is Joie?"

"Growing sad. We try to be optimistic with her, but it's getting hard. I hate lying. I'm not a parent so I don't know what's best."

I was a parent. Ironically, Jackson died from a head injury and Tony, the man who made me live again, his life hung on the balance with a head injury like Jackson. Gail stated the other wounds were not her main concern.

The head injury scared me because I was well aware of how deadly they could be.

I thought about Joie. How she probably was coloring or cutting up magazines. Thinking of her father, believing he was fine and only

stranded. How horrible it would be for her and shocking if something happened to Tony.

The mother in me wanted to protect her yet, that same mother believed she needed the truth.

“Peter, tell Melissa to break the news to Joie that her father was injured.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t have to have all the details, but she needs to know her father was hurt. Just ... just in case.”

“Is it that bad, Anna?”

“Yeah.”

I would have never thought in a million years that Tony would have taken a fall. I needed him to get better. Joie needed him.

After Gail’s second stop over, I told her I’d radio if there was a change. We decided on a channel, and while they couldn’t respond, they could hear. There was no need for her to trudge in the dark through the snow.

I started to finally feel a little hungry, and I heated some soup on a wire rack I placed over the kettle.

It was dark and the snow had finally stopped. The clouds parted and the moon lit up the area. It actually was quite beautiful in a desolate way.

“You had me really worried,” I told Tony. “I thought you left me. Well, no, I didn’t. I’m, teasing. I knew you’d never leave me. I know you can hear me. You have to fight Tony. I think that’s why you shut down, so you can fight. You have me and Joie and we both need you. God ... can you imagine if it was up to me to raise her. You know she’d end up a bleeding heart just like me. Or ... to give you incentive, maybe Gil will help.”

I set my spoon in the can and watched Tony for reaction.

Nothing.

It was a vain attempt to stir him.

I was tired from the stress but wasn’t going to sleep. It was only eight PM, and it was gonna be a long night.

Just as I started to have my one sided conversation with Tony again, I saw it.

A reflection of light. It shined ahead in the snow and grew bigger.

“Oh my God. I think they’re here.” I set down my soup, jumped up, grabbed my coat and hurried out the door.

If it wasn’t Protocol One then I hoped it was someone who could help. As soon as I stepped out, I heard the loud motor sound and the scraping of metal on concrete.

They were plowing?

I had inched my way into the valet area and when I did, around

the corner down River Road I saw the plow. They had taken the long way around and came in from behind the stadium.

Immediately, I raced to the Humvee and turned on the lights.

The truck turned up the driveway and stopped just before the canopied valet area. The passenger's door opened and Spencer stepped out. I wanted to scream. They plowed their way here and certainly would plow us back home. As I raced to Spencer, I knew all would be better. Not only did Duke step out of the truck, but so did Craig.

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"She did well, with what she had," Craig said upon examination of Tony. "I brought supplies. So we're good. I need to get as much light as I can get."

Spencer said, "We did bring those battery spot lights."

"Get them," Craig said, "I need a clean area, and I need to brighten that up. I think he has some internal bleeding."

"Can you operate?" I asked.

"I have to. What's here, Anna? Can you find me a table? Something we can move him to, and an area to operate on that we can clean?"

"What about the kitchen?" I asked. "The one has a grill with propane you can use for heat. The prep counter would work as a sterile environment. I can get that clean."

"Good thinking. We have to work fast. But one thing is important. He needs blood. Before I left, on a hunch I checked his type. B Positive. Any of you B?"

Both Spencer and I shook our heads.

Duke said, "I'm O."

"That may have to do," Craig said. "Okay. Spence, get the lights. Dad, you and I will get the kitchen ready. Anna, can you get a hold of this woman. Maybe they have someone in their camp with B blood."

"I'm on it." Before I made the call, I asked Craig. "What do you think? What are his chances?"

Very seriously Craig looked at me. "Let's get that blood in him and an IV going."

Prior to all this, we made fun of Craig and his IV obsession, but now I was so happy he was the king of IVs.

Hurriedly, I made my way to the Humvee and to the radio, switching to the predetermined channel. "This is Anna to Requin. Protocol help has arrived. We are in need of blood type B. If you hear this, if anyone has this blood type, please come to the casino. Tony needs your help." I paused and then repeated the radio call. I would do so for twenty minutes. That was the plan. Hoping that someone

would hear. But I didn't have to do it the whole time. Within ten minutes, not only did Gail show up, but four others from her camp, did as well. All of them there to help Tony. All of them with type B blood.

Fourteen – Old Habits

When Gil began his assembly of individuals he felt were vital to keep the shelter going and for the continuation of our way of life, he put Tony in charge of finding people. Scientists, Security, Agriculture and Doctors. From the list, Gil would wean through them, looking, as Tony put it, for the least likely person I would find interest in.

More so than qualifications of specialty Gil seemed to judge by that.

Thank God Tony only presented him with the best.

Craig was one of the best. He was a young man who knew what he was doing and focused on it as well. I didn't know his full list of qualifications, but when we returned to the bunker, I had every intention of getting to know Craig better. In the six months that I knew him, I don't believe I even knew his middle name. Where he went to school. For a brilliant man he deserved more from me.

I realized after he operated on Tony, without a doubt, that if my son could have been saved, then Craig would have saved him.

I wondered if when Tony chose Craig if he had an inkling Craig would save his life one day.

Craig did.

The surgery took hours. The low temperatures aided in slowing Tony's rapid heart rate. Craig felt he had slipped into shock. The loss of blood contributed to that. He told me Tony had something called splenic trauma. It was an injury to the spleen from whatever had surged into his gut. He repaired what he could, doing internal sutures as well as external.

He pumped him full of fresh blood and intravenous fluids. Tony's heart rate normalized, and while far from out of the woods, Tony was better.

"We can't move him. Not yet," Craig said. "A couple days and we can try. The less we move him the better off he is. I'm still not sure if I have to completely remove the spleen or not. I don't have a CT scan. For now, I think the bleeding stopped."

"What about the head injury?" I asked.

"Again, without a CT scan, it's hard to say. Rest will tell us everything."

"So we stay put and make the best of it?"

That was when Duke interjected. "I'd like to sight see."

Spencer added. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to finish what you guys came here for. Scan the area, and see who is remaining."

He was right. Not only would it be something to do, I would be able to do so without my primary focus being on Tony. We would

truly be able to assess the area.

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As evening really settled in, it was different than the night before. I wasn't alone, and that made it a much more curious environment.

We gently moved Tony to the bed we made by the main doors and Craig stayed with him. Duke found and made another source of heat and started a meal for us, while Spencer and I explored.

"Do you think," I said to Spencer, "There will ever be places like this again?"

"Casinos? Well ... I think it's going to be a while. At least places like this."

"And Vegas."

"God I loved Vegas." He paused, flashing his light on a dark slot machine. It was one of those video slots, and Spencer stared at it almost longingly. "This was my favorite to play." He ran his hand over the buttons. "We would take rides to the Casino in Erie. Stay the night. It was a fun time. But that casino was geared mainly for horse racing lovers and older folks. This one ..." He peered round and whistled. "...was for the young."

"Were you ever here?"

"Oh, sure. Over here." He walked over to where we had gotten the couch cushions for Tony. "This place was the big night spot down here." He tilted back his head. "Can't tell it now, but this whole pillar lit up." He walked behind the bar.

He set his light down on the bar and bent down. I listened as he cracked up the cabinet. Before he emerged into view a bottle of bourbon set on the bar, followed by two glasses.

He blew into them. "Drink?"

"Yes, thank you."

Spencer poured us a hefty drink, capped the bottle and placed it in the front pocket of his coat.

"Is there any more of the good stuff?"

He looked down. "A few bottles. Why?"

"We should take a few. In fact, pull them out ... I'll be right back."

We weren't far from where I kept the bags. I walked over to that way, informed Duke we'd be back, grabbed the empty Arctic Armor duffle, and took it to Spencer.

"How many do you want me to take?"

"A few, we can load them in the Humvee," I told him.

"Any reason why we're foraging?"

The use of the word foraging made me pause. "That is what I'm doing, isn't it?"

He nodded.

“Maybe for things we won’t have in the future. I don’t know. I realize there’s a big country out there. But I am sure a lot of survivors got to things and a lot of things went bad.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Before he placed the bottle in the bag, I swept up duffle. “Just lay them on the bar. There is something I need to get.”

Spencer muttered out a “what the heck’ but I didn’t answer. There was a short hallway next to the lounge. It had the ATM’s and next to them was the large cigarette machine. The glass was blackened over and I wasn’t sure what condition those packs would be in.

I kicked the glass with my foot and it did nothing but shake the machine. “Really?” I spoke out loud, looked around and saw an ashtray. The top was metal and I lifted it. Stepping back I gave it all I got and hurled that thing at the machine.

It cracked the glass, but didn’t shatter,

At the point of my frustration, thinking of another way, Spencer approached, inched me aside and with the butt of his rifle and the right amount of pressure, he hit that machine and shattered the glass.

“I weakened it for you,” I said.

He laughed. “You did. Saw a little crack. Wanna tell me why you weren’t in this case so bad?”

“Aside from the fact that fuck it, I want a smoke, Nelly will love this.”

“They may be pretty skunked.”

“They may. It’s been twenty years since I smoked, I may or may not notice, and I don’t think Nelly will care. I think she’s on the last of her stash.”

Using his gloved hand, Spencer cleared the glass. Ten rows of cigarettes, eight across. Some were ten packs deep. We hit the nicotine gold mine.

The day before the only two items I noticed were present in that casino, were the cigarettes and booze. With Spencer, Duke and Craig around, I was able to appreciate it more and decided to take advantage of the time and search around. I was certain the untouched Casino offered more treasures other than just ones that weren’t all that good for me.

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Staring down at the burning orange end of the cigarette, I laughed softly thinking again about the case of tiny fruit drink boxes we found in the storage room behind the kitchen. Why would a casino have drink boxes was one question I had on my mind, until Spencer pointed

out they were six ounce boxes of wine. Cute little things complete with straws.

Peter was going to love them.

I felt as if we went souvenir shopping in the casino, we had found so much. The back end of the Humvee would be packed by the time we left home. In the gift shop I found a cute little tee shirt for Joie and I grabbed books and stuffed animals for her and the other kids.

There were still a few more days of item gathering.

We sat around the kettle fire, a slight breeze kept blowing in through our open door. My cup of tea warmed on the grate and using my sleeve as an oven mitt, I removed it from the grate, added some bourbon, took a sip then hit my cigarette.

Granted I thought it was stale, but I grew used to it.

"Why are you smoking?" Craig asked.

"Because I want to. Please don't tell me you are getting on me about it affecting my health."

"Anna, I have to. I'm the doctor." Craig said. "And that is your third since dinner. Not to mention you are killing that bottle of bourbon."

"Oh my God, Craig," I said with a hint of disbelief. "I'm Anna by the book. The smoking will not be a habit I keep. Being alone was very tense. You guys are here, I'm relaxing. The nicotine is giving me a little high."

"Let her smoke," Duke said then held out his hand. "I'll take one."

"Dad!" Craig scolded. "You will get back in the habit, I know you."

"Who cares?" Duke took the smoke.

"Might as well give me one." Spencer said.

"No." Craig tried to intercept, but I was faster. Craig waved a finger. "I have to get angry. You have a health condition."

Spencer lit the cigarette and coughed. "You think these are gonna hurt me?"

"Yes."

"I got news for you Doc," Spencer winked. "My Parkinson's will kill me long before these get a chance to."

"I give up." Craig tossed out his hands. "Lost cause. Give me one."

We all laughed. It wasn't like we were all taking up the habit again, it was just something to do. New rules in a new world, I suppose.

Craig choked and coughed a lot when he lit up. His father told him it wasn't marijuana and to quit smoking it like it was.

Our fine Doc was a recreational marijuana user? No way. We had just started hearing stories about Craig as a teenager when another cough began.

This one was from Tony.

“Oh my God,” Tony groaned. “Did I have a bender and wake up in the staircase with Nelly or did you all take up smoking.”

I shrieked with excitement and raced over to his bedding behind Craig. It was the first he spoke a full sentence since I last saw him. “Tony,” I ran my hand down his face. “How do you feel?”

“Like I had a bender and I’m in Nelly’s room.” He said. His eyes only opened partially. “My head is pounding. I mean really pounding. If anything else hurts, I can’t tell. Why are you smoking?”

“Something to do. We found them.”

“Save some for Nelly. I’m sure she needs them after caring for Joie.”

“We have three hundred and twenty two packs for Nelly.”

“Swell.” He closed his eyes.

Craig inched over. “May I?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” I leaned down and kissed Tony before I let Craig do his examining thing.

I felt so much better at that moment. All the tension in my body from the last two days suddenly vanished.

Tony was awake. He looked better and sounded better. Plus, he was lucid.

I knew that Craig was worried about Tony not waking and if he did, would he know anything. That still remained to be seen, whether Tony was aware of what happened. His waking was hopeful.

Before I realized and enjoyed another drink, that one celebratory, I raced to the Humvee to finally deliver them some good news.

Things were looking up.

FIFTEEN – INVITATION

March 5

“There’s a joke about Pittsburgh,” Spencer said. “They have two seasons, summer and winter. Things can change on a dime.”

How right he was. We went from the day they arrived, over two feet of snow, to just a couple days later, the sun was shining so brightly, the plowed path just outside the casino began to melt. Weather wasn’t the hold up going home. It was Craig and Tony. Craig wouldn’t let Tony leave. Not yet.

A part of me agreed. I think Joie needed to see her father somewhat healed instead of arriving on his back headed to bed rest.

Physical he wasn’t a hundred percent, but personality wise, Tony was back to normal. Once he started lecturing me about trusting people, I knew his road to recovery was in progress.

The previous night I asked him. “Do you remember what happened?”

It was a question none of us broached. Especially since Craig told us head injury victims often don’t recall the event and hours prior. It could take days, weeks, even years.

“I remember thinking the girl was going through the casino, the guy driving around,” Tony said, “I didn’t think it through. I just didn’t want us stranded.”

Duke chuckled. “Well that failed.”

“No,” Spencer said. “He got the Humvee back. Painfully, but he did.”

“Guys,” I scolded, silencing the two men in their ribbing of him. “Go on, Tony.”

“I’m sorry, Anna, I am. I didn’t think, I really didn’t. I just knew I could catch them. I was right.”

“So you remember?”

Tony nodded. “I do. Well not the accident. I remember coming around the corner and seeing her. She ran as soon as she saw me, but I caught her and when I did, I saw she was a kid. No older than eighteen. I told her I didn’t want to hurt them, I just wanted my truck back and to take me where she was meeting him. I saw the Humvee and that was it.”

“They were young,” I said. “The driver accidentally hit you. The girl was killed. He took you to a nearby shelter they tried to help you, and when you woke up you came here.”

“Really?” Tony squinted. “I only remember waking up here. Are you sure?”

“Um I am very sure. You were not here for an entire day.”

There was a level of disbelief in Tony as if I was the one misled. But I knew and let it go.

Pittsburgh was slated for four scouting trips. Spencer, Duke and I did a lot of canvassing with the help of Larry.

We never crossed the river though and Larry was certain there were a few that remained in the center city, plus he believed a couple on the outskirts.

He told us, “If you would have seen the southern exodus when the sun came out and the temperatures rose, you wouldn’t believe how many survived.”

I liked that thought; it gave me hope for the future.

All in all, on the north side of town, we counted one hundred and eighty survivors in total from nine camps that we found. That was far too many to take, but we made sure we spoke with each of them about the plan to build and expand.

They would be needed at the new camps.

So many had skills that could be put to use.

I did however extend the invite to Larry, Gail and the kids to come along. He declined. I even offered again as he helped get us ready to leave.

“I’ll pass,” Larry replied. “We even discussed it again last night. No, we’ll wait until you are ready to build those communities. Weather will break, we’ll feel useful.”

“I appreciate all that you have done for me,” I said.

“Gail said to give you this.” He handed me a small sack. “It’s that fruit tea you like.”

I don’t know why but that made me well up. It was a sweet gesture. They knew where we were going, what we had, and they still offered and gave some of what they had.

It was touching and more than he knew, I would savor each sip.

“Thank you again,” I embraced him. “I look forward to seeing you and Gail in a couple months. If not sooner.”

“Us, too. Be safe.”

Just to be sure, I reiterated what channel I would use to give him updates and trusted him with the location of Protocol One should he run into any problems.

Tony, however, began his rant about that the second he got in the Humvee. “He’s gonna tell his friends and all of them are gonna pull an invasion on us.”

“Tony stop. He will not,” I said. “He will keep that location secret unless needed.”

The taillights of the truck blinked brightly, then after a short honk, Spencer, Craig and Duke pulled forward. I placed the Humvee

in gear.

“You don’t know, Anna,” He argued.

“Neither do you. You were passed out.” I replied.

“What about the stuff you found in Gwen’s phone.”

“And another thing we can discuss later. For now. Rest up. You want to be strong when we pull into Protocol One. Because we’re on our way.”

And we were.

It was a balmy forty-two degrees but it could have felt like eighty. I took off my coat for the drive. The sun was hopeful and bright, and a clear cut indication that the seasons just may be switching. We were away longer than we anticipated, but we were on track and finally heading back to Protocol One.

One phase of drama was over, and I was certain, another was not far behind.

At the Bunker – Peter

I knew the moment I returned from the restroom and saw the look on Tom's face, that the news was good. He set down the radio and turned to me with a look of relief.

"They're on the highway," Tom said. "That section they plowed on the way down is starting to melt and they should be here in less than two hours."

"That's awesome news. How's Tony?" I asked.

"Better. Not a hundred percent, but well on his way."

"Are they bringing anyone?"

Tom laughed. "I asked that same question."

"Well, we all know Anna."

"And the answer to that was 'no'."

"No? Wow."

"Yeah, tell me about it." Tom turned around again and faced the console.

"Is there anything they need us to do?"

"Actually, yes. Anna asked if I could get Melissa to make sure things were in order in Tony's room."

"Like a housekeeper?" That made me laugh. "Don't let Gwen hear that."

"I guess with him being under the weather, and stuck in his room, Anna wants it to be a relaxing environment."

"You know what?" I placed down my drink. "I'll go do it. In fact, I'm gonna find Joie, tell her the good news and her and I can work on that room together."

"She likes you. She'll appreciate you telling her. Plus, Tony's kind of Obsessive Compulsive, I really don't think his room will be that bad. I bunked with him once, and he made the bed perfectly so the maid wouldn't come into a messy room."

"Doesn't ... Doesn't everyone?"

"No." Tom answered, laughing out the word.

"I'll be back."

I probably was as excited as I knew Joie would be about the return of Anna and Tony, along with Craig his dad and Spencer. It wasn't the same without them. After all we were the first settlers in the bunker, and in their absence, things got weird.

They were quiet, not happy, and Gwen developed a new friendship with that Elwood woman Clarisse. The one that was part of the takeover but we didn't kick her out because of her son. Although, I was pretty convinced Gwen just made her the chamber maid or something.

I thought, because it was the middle of the day, Joie would be in

the living and recreation area. I went there first and she wasn't there, nor was she in the kitchen.

Melissa was. I told her of the news and she told me that Nelly and Joie were upstairs cleaning up. At least the last she heard. If they weren't there then she suggested the medical room that was next on their tidy up play.

Even though Nelly was psychically one step ahead of me, I still wanted to be the one to tell Joie. I took her under my wing the previous few days especially when I found out how intrigued Joie was about the images we received from the International Space Station. After seeing her enthusiasm, I was bound and determined that I would make her into the next scientist.

I hit the second floor of the hive and the main living area. Anna's door was locked, but Tony and Joie's door was open. I knocked once, received no answer and went inside.

The room was impeccably clean. It smelled fresh so I knew the duo had been there.

Tuning to leave, I pulled the door closed and decided I would just check Nelly's room. I made it a few doors down the hall when I stopped.

Gwen and Gil's voices carried into the hall.

They weren't arguing, they were talking. It was calm and collected, unlike most of the time I heard them speak.

Being the king of eavesdropping, I slowed down.

"Next week," Gwen said. "More than likely."

"That works. Have you come up with an explanation?" he asked.

"Not yet. Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked

"Positive," Gil said.

"Don't you worry about that they'll think?"

"Doesn't matter. I make the choices."

Whoa, I thought. *What did I stumble upon hearing?* Was I wrong for listening? Just when I decided to walk away, I opted against it. It was my duty as main gossip to listen further.

"Choice and decision is made. Now are you sure about Mason?" Gil asked.

"I'm positive. They have more than enough doctors to spare. They'll send him up here without question. Especially since we won't have one after you enforce..." Her voice grew louder, telling me they were heading out of the door. "Just..."

The door opened and despite my quick attempt to move back, I didn't make it far enough.

"Peter?" Gil said my name with question. "Can I help you?"

"Yes. Have you seen Nelly or Joie? I'm looking for them."

"Not recently," Gil replied.

Gwen folded her arms. "He was listening. I can tell. He's worse than two old women at a funeral home."

"What?" I laughed. "What kind of statement is that? God."

"Peter." Gil tilted his head. "We all know your reputation. Were you listening?"

"Not on purpose." I started to walk away, then stopped. "You do know that Craig is on his way back?"

"Yes," Gil replied. "We do."

"Ok, just checking."

"Pete," Gil called. "Again, I'll ask. What did you hear?"

I simply replied, "Enough" and continued to walk away. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing what I overheard. That information I would save for Anna.

SIXTEEN – RETURN

By the number of people outside the bunker when we returned, I would have thought it was summer. Skyler, Craig's partner was wearing a tee shirt and jeans. The only winter wear he had on were his boots and a pair of gloves to form snowballs.

It was warmer, but far from ... warm.

They were a welcome sight.

When we stepped from our vehicles, Craig was greeted with a snowball and then greeted with a warm embrace from Skyler.

Joie was with Peter. That surprised me because Peter wasn't an outdoor person. Joie squealed loudly and ran to her father.

I had to stop him from lifting her. "Honey, Daddy is still sick. When he gets back to the room you can hang out with him there."

Joie agreed and grabbed hold of my legs, upon that I crouched down and embraced her. "I missed you," I told her and planted my lips to her head. "We aren't leaving again." I peered up to Peter. "Where is Melissa?"

"Working. We're over-egg-loaded again," Peter said.

Skyler hurried over. "Need some help, Tony?"

"No," Tony answered.

"Yes," I said. "He does. Please. If you don't mind?"

"Not at all," Skyler replied.

"I do," Tony argued. "Anyone care?"

"Daddy, be a good patient." Joie held his hand, as Skyler gripped one of Tony's arms.

I knew by the way Tony moved he wasn't well. He staggered some, moved slowly. If it had been pre-comet, Tony would have had a wheelchair waiting. He wasn't in top shape, yet he had a long way to go to get to his room.

Peter gave a nervous twitch to his head and rubbed his chin. "We uh, need to talk."

"About?"

He looked over his shoulder and Gil had stepped out. Somehow I expected him to approach me, greet me, I knew that wasn't going to happen when I saw Gwen behind him.

However, his lack of focus on me wasn't what shocked me. It was him, simply stating to Craig, Spencer and Duke, "I need to speak to you three. Inside. Now!"

After blinking in shock, I finally stood up. "Peter, is that what you want to talk to me about?"

"Yep."

"What's it about?"

“Oh, boy.”

I didn't need any further information. Immediately, I followed Gil and the others into the bunker. Gil hadn't a clue I was behind them, and that I heard what he said as soon as he pulled them into Peter's little computer lab.

“I'm not gonna beat around the bush. You three broke rules, disobeyed the regulations. You have three days to leave this compound. We will provide you with enough...”

He didn't get to finish, I walked right in. “Over my dead body. Oh, wait. It could have been over mine *and* Tony's dead body had they not come after us. I assume that is the rule they broke?”

“Anna,” Gil stated. “This is my domain.”

“Yeah, but it's my bunker. Didn't you say that? Didn't you build it for me?”

“I did. But didn't you give leadership to me.”

“I did.” Folding my arms, I stepped to him. “But being a leader isn't being a dick. What the hell, Gil? Do what I say and you're fine. Disregard me you're gone.”

“They took valuable supplies and resources, Anna.”

“To help us. Seriously? You want to throw them out?”

“Seriously? Yes. If they don't leave, I will have them removed.”

“Fine. You can bet Skyler goes, too. They go. I go. If I go, Tony and Joie go. We leave, Nelly will go as well as Melissa. I'd add Peter to that pack, but I doubt he'd go.”

“No,” Peter's voice interjected. “I would go.”

“There you have it.” I tossed out my hands. “How dare you throw out my friends? This is their home. They kept this place running. They risked their lives for me and Tony. The resources they used belong to the bunker. Our bunker, all of us.”

“But someone needs to be in control. In a leadership position.”

“Gil!” I held up my hand silencing him. “You're pissing me off. Guys, can we have a minute please.”

“Absolutely,” Craig said.

“I'm gonna check on Tony,” said Spencer as he left.

Duke walked out as well.

I waited. “Pete, that means you, too.”

“Oh. Okay. Sorry.” Peter finally walked out.

“Anna.” Gil stated firm. “I understand your compassion. Please don't undermine my authority.”

I laughed in ridicule. “And you don't think, kicking out a good team is going overboard?”

“They broke the rules.”

“No, Gil, they enforced the rules of what this bunker was about. To make sure I lived. When I gave you running power, I did so

because you had a save the world vision. Tossing them out isn't saving the world, it's a dictatorship, and I won't have it."

"Anna, I know it sounds like a dick move. But when one group disregards the rules set forth, how can I execute strength as a leader if I let them go."

"Kicking them out doesn't show weakness in leadership it shows how much of a tyrant you can be. I don't know what your motivation was for not wanting them to help, I don't care." I stepped to him. "But let me tell you something, Gil. I don't like this man before me. I don't like what you have become. What you showed me and what you do are two different things. I want the old Gil back. If he even exists or was that a smoke screen and act to hide your true colors?"

"Anna, stop this."

"No, I'm pissed. I really am. You wanted to kick them out. You told them to leave. That's bullshit. If you ever ..." I moved even closer. "Ever fucking pull a stunt like that again, call it a mutiny, Mr. Leader and I will give *you* three days to get out." I spun on heels and moved to the door.

"You can't do that."

"Watch me." I stopped. "And if you don't go when I tell you, I'll remove you myself." On those words, I finally left.

I don't know if Gil took me seriously or not. Hearing him 'kick out' Craig, Spencer and Duke infuriated me. Was Gil implying that their taking of the truck, medical supplies and fuel was stealing? They weren't doing anything bad, they were doing good. I really needed to sit down and talk to Peter because obviously he knew things. Gil's sudden turnabout sickened me. It was not the kind man I knew. Not the selfless man I loved. What happened? Was it power? Gwen? Or maybe he had changed over the years and I never saw it. If something like an impromptu rescue set off what Tony called the Giltatorship, I didn't want to know what would happen if and when something truly bad occurred.

Seventeen – Back and Forth

Gil tried several times to talk to me throughout the day. I wanted no part of it, I just wanted to spend time with Joie and Tony. I needed Tony back to where he had been and for that he needed to rest. I asked Spencer, Craig and Duke not to mention anything to Tony about Gil's threats. That was something I would handle, and they agreed.

At one point, just before dinner, Gil did manage to corner me.

"I don't want us to be like this, Anna. We never were before."

"Do you even comprehend how this looks?" I asked him. "You were gonna throw out three really good and reliable men. I feel foolish. I have made bad choices this whole time. Not thinking about others. That's why I thought for sure, letting you take reins would be the best thing. It wasn't. This is not you."

He lowered his head some. "This is not the same world. In situations like this, we need order. Defiance is ..."

"Oh, stop it."

"No, you stop it. You are not thinking this through. You gave me the leadership position here. I have a plan. One that will get many people fed, happy, and back on their feet. Everything they need."

"Hitler tried that once. You saw how well that worked out for him."

Gil bit his bottom lip. "Everything is planned out. Every gallon of gas. Every vehicle."

"What were you gonna do about me, Gil? Leave me there?"

"You were fine, Anna. We would have sent someone for you when the weather broke. Those three risked a needed vehicle and the amount of fuel they consumed to do so was insane."

"What about Tony? Was his life not worth it?"

Gil didn't answer.

"Guess not."

"Anna, what would you have done as leader, if say, three of the new survivor guys took the biggest gas guzzling truck you had, after telling them they couldn't, and disappeared for days."

"If they did it to help someone, then nothing." I replied.

"That is why you are not leader."

"And this is why you are not my husband anymore."

"Stop." He lifted his hand. "That hurt. Okay? Now what is it going to take to get you to like me again?"

"Be the way you used to be. I trusted you. I really did."

"Anna, I haven't changed. You just never got to see me in this scenario."

"It's just hard to believe. But seeing that the whole divorcing

Gwen was a lie, it only makes sense.”

He slowly shook his head. “You don’t get it. I don’t care about Gwen. I would have and still would give my right arm to be with you.”

There was one thing that was certain. If you have a conversation in a community area such as a stairwell, in a bunker, and you don’t want someone to hear what you say ... they will.

Gwen did.

While her expression and gasp were priceless, it was my out and I excused myself from that stairwell.

There were two things I needed to do, one was talk to Peter and the other meet Joie for dinner and then Joie and I would head back to my room with Tony.

I missed my room.

But the bunker didn’t hold the same effect as it did before I met Larry and the others.

I couldn’t even call myself a survivor any longer. What I did was beat the odds due to being privileged. Larry and the others beat the odds of the comet and were truly the survivors. I carried that with me. I wished I could have brought them all back to the bunker.

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Peter was easy to find. Other than his room, he was usually in one of three places. His office, the safe room or in the kitchen getting a drink box. Luckily, he was alone in the safe room when I found him and I closed the door, locking it.

“I’m going to take it this isn’t some sort of seduction,” he said.

“No.” I smiled and sat down next to him.

“Thought I’d ask. What’s going on?”

“Tell me. What happened when I was away?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean with Gil. How was he?”

“He was Gil. I mean, he was worried about you.”

“What did you find out or hear?” I asked. “That you needed to talk?”

“I overheard him and Gwen talking about a replacement doctor. I figured he was kicking them out. Because, Anna, he was freaking pissed they took the plow truck.”

I leaned back. “It doesn’t make sense for him to get so mad he’d throw people out.”

“It’s Gwen,” Peter said nonchalantly. “She has something on him.”

“What?” I laughed out my response.

“Seriously, it’s something. I mean, why is she here? She hates it

here. I realize Gil's her husband and all even though the divorce was a ruse, but there's no love lost there. Why come up here?"

"Because I think she is trying to find out where everything is. The fuel and other things he has hidden out there. I mean she knows about them, the location and Gil's plan is what she needs to figure out."

"For what purpose?"

"Whoever has the fuel has the power, maybe."

"Nah, that's not it. Maybe they don't want Gil having that much control," Peter said. "I mean, he gets things up and running, the government is gonna have to bow to him. They don't want that. And apparently, it's Gil's secret apocalypse fantasy to rule the world."

"I would have doubted that a year ago," I said. "It just doesn't make sense. I keep saying that. But this is really not Gil."

"How are we sure that she even knows all his secrets?"

I actually debated on telling Peter about how Gwen knew, but then again, it was Peter and after telling him, I was glad I did.

"When Tony and I took the Humvee, we found a bag she left behind."

"What kind of bag?"

"What kind of bag? Like a gym bag, but small, soft leather."

"Sounds nice."

"Peter," I snapped. "Oh my God, this has nothing to do with the bag. It has to do with what was *in* the bag. Aside from really nonsense items she had a BlackBerry."

"She had her phone? Why? Who uses their BlackBerry in the apocalypse?"

"Apparently, Gwen, because she was communicating with someone at Damnation Alley, that's how I got the message call for help. But other than that, is what she has all the documents. Everything about what Gil has. Stuff I didn't know about. I haven't even looked at it lately, but it's all there."

"So if Gil knows she has this, then he is trying to keep her from letting it out. If he doesn't, she's here to get the rest of the info."

"I guess. But it's hard to tell only the files are there and about four text messages to one person."

"No contacts?"

I shook my head. "No other messages. She either had that as a dedicated device or she deleted stuff."

"Let's find out."

"How?" I asked.

"Give me the BlackBerry, I'll hack it."

"Can you?"

"Uh, yeah, I can. May take a few days, but I will. If she deleted messages, they are there. Files, too."

"That is excellent. I'll give it to you tomorrow."

"That works."

Excited, I stood and kissed him on the cheek.

"Ha, see, I knew you shut the door to put the moves on me." Peter said

That made me laugh, I shook my head, reminded him it was dinner, thanked him again and headed out.

I wanted to have dinner with Joie and I knew she was in the dining area.

Nelly had made chicken chili and the whole place smelled of its goodness. She said she was in a good mood because of her gift.

I swore I became her new favorite person when I gave her that duffle bag full of cigarettes.

"You just don't know what it was like," she said. "Staring at that half pack knowing that was it."

I told her they were a tad stale, but she didn't care. I didn't think she would.

Nelly had a tray for Tony, and would heat up chili for that plate, after Joie and I had eaten. As a special thank you for the smokes, I got an extra piece of corn bread. Joie and I were seated at the first table, catty-corner to each other. I got a good view of the dining area and was amazed how many people were there. Survivors that happened upon us in the previous months, one Duke stumbled upon. Soldiers that Gil knew.

Nelly fed them all, if we grew any more she wouldn't be able to keep up. She already complained that she hated being the lunch lady. Although a part of me believed she enjoyed it.

Joie only had a small helping. She wasn't fond of the chili and stared at the cornbread with a sense of guilt.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's like cake. Should I save this for Daddy?"

"No, honey you eat it," I said. "Nelly has put a piece on his tray, too. We'll take it to him."

No sooner had I said that I caught through the corner of my eye, Gwen as she stopped by our table.

"Well," she said snidely. "I see why there's no more cornbread. Someone took two slices." She nodded her head at my plate.

"Nelly, gave it to me," I replied cordially. "But you are welcome to have one."

"I wouldn't take anything from you. Unlike you who just takes from others."

Ready to respond, I didn't need to. Joie slammed down her spoon.

"Why are you so mean to my new Mom?"

I heard that and immediately gasped out emotionally with an 'Aw'. My hand shot to my chest. "That is so sweet."

"You replaced your mother awfully fast," Gwen quipped at the little girl.

"I didn't know my mother. So there I was a doorstep baby."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be six next week."

"You speak like your sixty. It's not becoming." She turned to walk away.

"Neither is being rude," Joie said.

I reached over and laid my hand on Joie's. "Let it go. Don't say anything else. She is your elder."

"But she's mean to you. And she has a poison."

"What?" I laughed.

"I bed your pardon," Gwen said. "What poison?"

"Bot ... bot ..." Joie growled in frustration. "Botched something."

"Botulism?" I guessed.

"That's it." Joie said.

"Why would you say that?" I asked.

"Peter told me," she picked at her cornbread. "I asked why her forehead didn't move and he said it was because she got something made out of that poison."

"Botox," I said.

Gwen cleared her throat harshly. "It is filler. It fills in the lines. If Peter is going to teach you things, he needs to teach you correctly. And I will take that cornbread now." Before I could respond, she reached, grabbed one of my cornbread and started to storm away, but stopped and turned back.

Joie held up her half eaten cornbread. "Did you come back for mine?"

Gwen raised her eyebrows. "Thinking about Peter teaching you things. He is an extremely intelligent man but oftentimes intelligence leaves room for social blunder. So, I was thinking, you seem like a quaint little girl. Time here in this place is rather drudgingly slow, perhaps I can alleviate the boredom by taking you under my wing and teaching you some things, if that is fine with your ..." She shifted her eyes with a snide expression. "New mother."

"Teach me what?" Joie asked. "Like math."

"No. I went to finishing school. And I..."

"To finish what?" Joie asked.

"To finish myself."

"Were you not done?"

At that point, I decided to explain to Joie. "Finishing school is where they refine you and teach you manners and stuff."

“Did you go?” Joie asked me.

Gwen laughed.

I refrained from saying anything. I was curious why Gwen wanted to take special interest in Joie. Was she really that bored?

“It’ll be fun,” Gwen said. “I’ll teach you how to be quite the little lady even in this Godforsaken world. People are going to need to emerge from the ashes with class and poise.”

I saw it. Joie was ready to turn her down flat. But I had other plans. What better way to figure out what was going on with Gwen then to pull an inside job. Joie was years ahead in intelligence and having been raised by Tony, she had a keen natural instinct to keep her eyes open and take in everything.

“She would love it,” I said before Joie declined. “I would love it. It really would be a great thing. You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. We’ll start tomorrow.” He eyes cased downward to Joie picking at her food. “With table manners.” She turned and then walked away.

“Anna,” Joie whined.

“No whining.”

“I don’t want to do this. I’m finished. I have all my parts.”

“No, you will like this.”

“Why did you tell her ‘yes’?”

“Eat your food. When we go to our room,” I winked. “Then we’ll talk.”

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Admittedly, I had the biggest room in the Protocol One Bunker. Tony and the others would sarcastically refer to it as the Queen’s chambers, and rightfully so. In comparison it was the Presidential Suite of the Wyndham and the others were in rooms at the Motel 6.

There was a lot of room and I had more furniture to make it seem more of an apartment. The adjoining door originally led to Tony’s room, but now, it was all Joie’s and we left that open.

After doing some coloring, I explained to Joie, she just had to go with the flow with Gwen and to tell me everything she does outside of teaching her when they are together.

Joie got it right away, “You want me to be your spy.”

“In a sense yes.” I said. “Plus you’ll learn good manners.”

We wound down the night with a story and I left to take my second three minute shower of the day. I needed it and Tony was driving me nuts. He decided after he ate, it was time to get out of bed and get moving. He started this pacing across the room. I figured after the shower and dressing, he’d be done.

That was not the case.

When I came back, he was still walking. Wall to wall, around the chair, lifting the chair.

"We have a fitness room," I said, walking in.

"Craig said not to exercise." Tony paced. "So I'm casually moving about until I get the all clear."

"Look at you being the good obedient patient." I opened my top drawer and pulled out the Gwen BlackBerry along with paper and a pencil.

"What are you doing?" Tony asked.

"Not pacing the floor, that's for sure." I straightened the covers on the bed and then sat on them; I hate a messy bed, even if I was getting into it for the night. "When are you going to stop?"

"When I feel I got some energy."

"Oh that makes sense," I said. "Wear down to feel energized."

"If you exercised Anna, you'd know. Beside I feel like I gained flab."

I bit my bottom lip. "You did. I didn't want to say anything."

Tony stopped walking.

"Yeah, not weight, but like I was shocked how fast that toned definition turned into kind of flab."

He gasped.

"And I think five days of doing nothing slowed you down."

"What do you mean?"

I tossed the pen at him and it smacked against his arm and fell to the floor. "That. You would have caught that two weeks ago. You never saw it coming."

"You're right." He bent down for the pen, paused in what figured was pain, picked it up and handed it to me. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, making notes on what Gwen has in here as far as documents. I want to really see what she has and try to figure out what she is up to. I wanted to talk to you about it but then you went ahead and got hurt. Lost and hurt. Remind me when you're better to yell at you for leaving me."

"Yeah, right on that."

"And I want to look at this again before I give it to Peter."

"Why are you giving that to Peter?"

"So he can hack into it to see if there are messages we missed. Ones that were deleted."

"You told him?" Tony groaned. "Anna, stop trusting people."

"I trust Peter. It's Gwen I don't trust."

"And Gil?"

I lowered the BlackBerry. "I don't know Tony. Something is up with him. Like he's being blackmailed. It's not Gil."

"And I'm telling you, it is. You're just now seeing the real guy."

"Did you ever trust anyone?"

"No." He shook his head.

"Not even me?"

"Sometimes you have your questionable moments."

I gasped.

"Especially when you just wave out your arm to strangers and say, 'Hey, come on in, it's cold out there, we have plenty.'" He mocked me.

"Yeah, well, that me is gone."

Tony scoffed and laughed. "Yeah, right. You still defend Gil."

"That's because I really feel it isn't him, it's Gwen."

"Anna," Tony walked over and sat on the bed next to me. "You don't think it was a little psychotic all the things he did with that end of the world plan?"

"No, it was to save humanity."

Tony stared at me, then shook his head.

"I'll prove it's Gwen."

"I know you're trying. You have my daughter hanging out with her starting tomorrow."

"Everyone needs manners. Gwen brought up a good point. Some must emerge from the ashes with class."

"In the apocalypse?"

"Especially in the apocalypse."

He shook his head again. "So you are having Joie be a Peter and be the eyes and ears so you can find out more about her and what is going on?"

"Yes, and it fell into my lap. She asked Joie."

"Uh huh," Tony nodded. "And did it ever occur to you, that she asked Joie for the same reason?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe she's getting close to my daughter so she can find out about you?"

"Ha! Good thing Joie is smarter than that. It's a win-win, Tony. I get info, your daughter gets manners. Do you know how much finishing school cost before all this? We're saving a ton."

Tony did a fake laugh at my bad joke, raised the BlackBerry to my view and told me, "Go back to your documents."

"Go back to pacing."

I returned to pulling up the documents, what few there were. I was certain, Gwen was up to something. It was easy to generalize what it was, but to find out specifically, was a puzzle.

One I would solve.

Just like Gwen claimed to want to tutor Joie as a means to pass time. I was going to make my Gwen investigation, my means to pass

the time as well.

At the Bunker – Peter

March 9

One of the most annoying problems I have had all my life was the inept ability to dream of whatever occupied my mind. To the point it was annoying, irritating, and caused me to wake up numerous times. And I always continued the dream.

I knew it was coming. I had been working a few days on hacking Gwen's phone. Most of which was printing up the documents she had. I found some short stories she had started writing and deleted from her phone. Of all the things to find. I wanted to tell her to give up being a writer, but if I did that, she would know I had her phone.

I had spent so much time with that phone, even stopping to play a game of Battleship with Tony didn't help. He was back to himself and he wasn't sleeping because of all the rest he got during his injury. So I found myself hanging out with him at night.

Damned if Gwen didn't invade my dreams.

I made the mistake of telling Tony that every time I closed my eyes to sleep I dreamt of her.

"Maybe you have a thing for Gwen," Tony suggested.

"I liked you better when you had a head injury," I told him. "You didn't talk. J 4."

"Hit," Tony said. "I'm just saying. You're dreaming about her. Are they dirty dreams? G 9."

"Miss. No, asshole. I just wanted to have someone to talk to about it. I haven't had a good night's sleep in a couple of nights. H 4."

"Sunk." Tony grabbed the ship and tossed it. "Okay, I'm sorry. Are the dreams what you are reading or what? H 7."

"Hit."

"Yes." Tony clenched his fist in excitement.

"They are to a point. She wrote a short story about an old man and a crippled pony."

Tony peered his dark eyes over his Battleship board. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, it sucked, but damned if I didn't dream about Gwen on a three legged horse."

Tony laughed. Maybe if we play long enough tonight you'll dream about ships."

"Maybe."

I won the game, but Tony was right in part. I did dream of big battleships, nonetheless, Gwen was on board, swinging on the flagpole like some sort of back room stripper.

I gave up.

After two hours of sleep, I figured I might as well work. My shift started at seven, and Walt, one of Gil's guys was working the night. He probably would welcome the early relief.

After I stopped by the kitchen, grabbed some granola and unsuccessfully hunted out the hidden and rationed drink boxes, I hit the safe room.

Walt looked a little shocked. So much so, I wondered if he had fallen asleep on shift.

"What... what are you doing here? It's only five-fifteen." He asked.

"I couldn't sleep. You might as well go on back to your room." I opened my laptop.

His eyes shifted to the monitors. "Um, no, I'm good. You don't have to be here."

"What's up?" I asked. "Did something happen?"

"No, it's been pretty calm."

"Uh huh." I nodded. "Did you mess something up? You keep looking at monitor three."

Walt exhaled. "I did. I accidentally hit the wrong monitor. The feed was off for about ten minutes."

"Oh," I waved out my hand. "I did that last Tuesday. You're fine. Of course, Tony wasn't working then. I'll speak to him if he gets mad."

"Thanks."

Walt stayed with me another fifteen minutes, nervously chatting about food and other things. It struck me as odd. Maybe I just wanted him to leave. I brought my folder of Gwen stuff, and needed the time without Tom to review it. Tom was coming on at eight.

Finally, Walt left. Not that he wasn't a nice guy, but I wanted that room to myself. It gave me the chance to put on the camera outside Gwen's room.

I switched that on, the hallway was empty and then I checked my satellite feed.

Oddly, there was nothing from the International Space Station. They usually sent me a few images of cloud coverage so I could try to predict the weather.

Slightly concerned, I lifted the radio and called out. "This is Protocol One, calling Damnation Alley. Are you there? Over."

Mulligan, my favorite radio guy and soldier from Damnation Alley responded. "I'm here. Over."

"Good to hear you," I said. "Your voice is clearing up."

Mulligan had been suffering from an ongoing bout with bronchitis. His voice thickened while he was sick. I envisioned a big red haired man on the radio. Perhaps the name gave me that vision.

"Mulligan, have you gotten anything from the ISS? My feed is empty today."

“Nothing today. I can try to reach out. How are you, Pete?” he asked. “Over.”

“I’m good. You? Over.”

“I’m good. I mean with the exile. I know it was sudden and seemed like a bad move, but you hadn’t said anything at all. So I figured those guys did something really bad.”

What? My mind blasted. What was he talking about?

Exile? They were kicking someone out? It was warming up, yes, but it was still hovering at freezing level, and weather was unstable. It wasn’t safe to do.

Immediately, I started switching up the monitors. Looking for who left or any signs of an exile.

“Mulligan, who and when did the exile take place?”

“You don’t know?”

“Negative.”

“Just about twenty minutes ago. We received word our man arrived and yours was leaving.”

Bingo.

Monitor three.

Exterior. I saw the vehicle outside the bay doors. They were still there, they hadn’t left.

“I guess they were going to tell you,” Mulligan said. “I am surprised you didn’t know. After all, you arrived with them. Over.”

“Let me get back to you.” My eyes stayed transfixed on the screen. “Thank you for the info. And hey, uh, don’t tell anyone you told me in case you weren’t supposed to. Over.”

“Roger that. Out.”

“Out.” Radio down, eyes still on the monitor, I knew I had to do something. I was alone in the safe room, if I waited on Tom, whoever was leaving would be long gone, and I didn’t want that to happen.

I could only guess who was leaving. I was up and awake. Why didn’t I hear any commotion?

I had three options.

One, I could wait for Tom and then investigate.

Two, I could run to the bay doors and find out myself.

Or three, my best option. Get Anna, because I was certain she didn’t know and if anyone could stop it, she could.

Doing something I would never had done before, I left the safe room unattended and raced out. I didn’t really worry about the consequences, after all, I wasn’t even supposed to be on duty.

EIGHTEEN – EXILE

It was not unusual at all for Joie to wake me in the middle of the night or wee hours of the morning to walk her to the bathroom. Nor was it uncommon for Tony to nudge me to tell me I was snoring. It was, however, highly unusual for Peter to wake me. In fact, it was the first time ever and I jolted awake.

He poked me three times with his bony finger, whispering my name. “Anna. Anna.”

I gasped as I sat up. “What?”

“Get dressed. Hurry. Meet me at the safe room.”

My mind was still spinning in a half sleep state, I barely muttered out, “Why?” when the door opened and closed. Peter was gone.

How did he even get in the room?

I glanced at the alarm clock and it was just after 5:30. If he was secretly coming in the room then it was more than just an information meeting.

Slipping from bed, I grabbed my clothes from the chair.

“Why was Peter in our room?” Tony asked groggily.

“He needs to talk to me about something in the safe room.” I began to get dressed.

“He’s not on duty yet.”

“Go back to sleep. I’m sure it’s nothing,” I said.

“If he’s grabbing you at this hour, it’s something. Peter is flakey but he doesn’t over react.”

“I know, and that worries me.” I pulled on my boots. “I’ll come back if there’s a problem.”

“It’s probably something weather related. You know he gets those images from the space station.”

“Probably.” I darted a kiss to Tony and hurried from the room.

Even though Peter needed me right away, I made a dash to the bathroom, and a quick brush of my teeth that would make any dentist cringe. It was a good thing I made that stop, because when I came out of the rest room, Gil was walking up the hallway, carrying a mug of what I could only assumed was coffee.

“Anna,” he said brightly as he approached. “You’re up early.”

“I ... I couldn’t sleep.”

“Need company?” He asked.

“No. But ...” I grabbed the mug from his hand and after a sniff, I took a couple healthy swallows of the coffee and handed it back to him. “Thanks.” I walked by him.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Um ... to get coffee and see if ISS images are in.”

“Wanting to get a jump on them before Peter?”

“Yep.” I nodded. “See ya in a bit.” Not wanting to draw attention, as if being up that early wasn’t attention enough, I walked casually to the stairwell, but once through the door, I raced up the stairs and to the safe room.

“What’s going on?” I asked, closing the door.

“Took you long enough,” Peter said.

“I’m sorry I had to go to the bathroom and I ran into Gil.”

“Floor one.”

“Yeah, I guess going to this room. What’s going on?”

Peter exhaled and ran his hand through his hair. “They’re gone.”

“I’m sorry. Who?”

“My guess, Duke, Craig, Spencer and Skyler.”

“Wait. What do you mean, they’re gone?” I asked.

“Exiled. I found out when I spoke to Mulligan. I’ve been watching through the monitor.”

“On foot?”

“No, they were given a van. “

“I’m killing him. Gil just kicked them out without letting them say, ‘Goodbye?’”

“They were sly about it. Doing it before anyone woke up. My guess Gil had everything ready and they escorted them out.”

My eyes lifted to the monitor of outside. “How long?”

“They just pulled through the gates.”

I nodded quickly, trying to take everything in. Knowing what had to be done, I opened the left drawer next to where Peter sat and removed a set of keys. When I did, I noticed the folder on the desk. “Is that the Gwen info?”

“Yeah, why?”

I flipped open the folder, Peter had everything neatly tabbed, unlike my folder and I found the information I was looking for. “I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?”

“To try to catch them.” I opened the safe room door.

“What do I tell Gil or Tony if they ask?”

“The truth.” Keys in hand along with the Gwen information, I ran from the safe room and headed topside.

NINETEEN – DIRECTION

Fueled by anger and not quite coherent enough to make sound decisions, I fled from the safe room, making it topside and to the Humvee before I was noticed.

Some lame guard called out for me to stop, but I didn't. I wasn't even wearing a coat. The snow had started to melt, and following fresh tracks was impossible. My only guess is they were headed south, maybe even back toward Pittsburgh.

In a barren world, there is no traffic, few sounds, and visibility was good. It took me twenty minutes at uncomfortable fast driving speed to spot them just outside Elwood City. When I did, I beeped my horn and flashed my lights. It didn't take long for the van to pull over.

I drove up alongside of them, and Spencer who had been driving was out of the van before I slipped from the Humvee.

"Anna, what the hell?"

I caught my breath.

"Where is your coat?" Spencer asked.

"Really? You guys are exiled and you ask where my coat is?" I laughed. "I'm sorry. I just ... Peter got me and told me. I had to chase you down."

Craig, Skyler and Duke had exited the van.

"What happened?" I asked. "Tell me exactly what happened?"

Craig started. "I got the knock on the door just before five, pretty much Gil and two guards telling me we were out. Just like he said. They had a packed van and said bye."

"Why didn't you fight?" I asked. "Find me or Tony?"

"We were escorted," Duke said. "To the door. There wasn't time. Skyler barely caught us."

"What a dick," I shook my head. "He acted as if it was over. Good thing Peter saw and got me."

"Anna," Craig reached out to my shoulder. "We appreciate you coming here, but we aren't going back. We talked about it. We aren't."

"We're a team," I said. "A family. We've all been through the worst together. Melissa, Nelly none of us want to be separated."

Craig nodded. "I understand. I do. But we can't live like that. We mess up we're out. So if you came out here to get us back. It's not gonna work."

"I had a feeling about that. How much gas do you have?"

Spencer answered. "A full tank and ten gallons spare. They gave us supplies and food. He ..." Spencer chuckled. "Didn't exile us empty handed. So we figure go south, and find a place to start over."

"Good." I said. "Not good you're leaving, but good. Maybe you

can get it started for all of us.”

“What do you mean?” Duke asked.

I lifted a finger, opened the Humvee door and retrieved the papers I took from Peter.

“Down near Charlton, West Virginia is a small fuel repository. I don’t know how much is there, it is more of a filler station.” I handed the sheet to Duke. “In Virginia, there is a food repository. Located under an old factory. The factory may be gone, but there is an underground hatch.” I handed another sheet to Duke. “And finally, in South Carolina is the Dylan camp. A former plantation that Gil purchased and had fenced in. It’s bare. It’s not build up. It needs to be primed for planting. All the information you need to find the stuff is right there.”

Spencer looked over Duke’s shoulder to the papers. “These are like the places out west. Not as big though.”

I shook my head. “Remember Gil saying he had the fan out method for building camps. This location is one of the locations. He has no clue that I have this information. So secure it. Hopefully we will be there before Gil decides to send a team there.”

“He needs people first,” Spencer said. “He’s not really gathered survivors yet. He will though. It’s the plan for May and June.”

“We’ll beat him to it. You get it ready, if you want ...” I pointed. “And the rest of us will join you. It may take a while. But we will be there. This is a solid place for you to go.”

Craig asked. “You have everything you need in that bunker Anna. Why would you want to go to a place and start from scratch?”

“Well, I really won’t be starting from scratch. You guys will start from scratch. But I do have everything I need at the bunker, except freedom and open air. Do this. I’ll be there. But the main reason is, we have been through this all together. We’re family. Family sticks together.”

Spencer embraced me. “We’ll do this.”

“I know. Now go there, directly there. Don’t stop for anything.” I told them. “Find radios. If you can, radio in as some random survivors in a random location. Keep me posted if you can.”

Craig held up a ‘scouts honor’ and stepped to me. “I will. We have a radio. Thank you. Stay safe up here.” He hugged me, stepped back and stopped. “Oh, Anna, should we only expect you, Tony and the others from the bunker or should we prepare for you to be like Moses and lead a large pilgrimage.”

“Play it by ear,” I smiled.

I said my goodbyes to them all, wishing them the best of luck. I felt good about giving them the information and I also felt confident they would have no problems pulling off the preparations. After all,

anal Gil, set up the system. He was just not expecting me to be involved.

After watching them drive off, I turned the Humvee around and headed back to the bunker. I had fifteen minutes until I returned and some thinking to do during the drive.

Twenty – Biding Time

It was only a matter of time before someone figured out I had taken the Humvee and drove off. I wasn't gone long, not at all. No one came after me and I was sure, though, had I not replied to Gil's radio call, someone would have.

"Anna, do you read? Over." Gil called out.

Finally, after several attempts, I answered. "I read."

"Where are you? Over."

"A few minutes outside the gate."

"Coming or going?"

"Returning," I replied.

Silence.

"I thought you left for good."

"Don't be silly, I'm not even dressed." I hesitated before saying any more, quickly thinking of what I would tell him. 'I just wanted to say goodbye to my friends and we'll discuss this when I get there. Over. Out.'

I wanted to scream at Gil, plan the ultimate punch to the face. However, I couldn't. If I wanted Craig and the others to arrive down south safely and unknown, if I wanted to stockpile my own supplies to take with me and do so unnoticed, I had to act as if all was fine.

In fact, anyone that wanted to leave with me had to act that way.

I didn't need to be head of GSS or a master detective to see something was terribly amiss. Three men exiled quietly at dawn.

When I arrived back it was fifteen minutes after six. Tony probably didn't even know I had left. Which was a good thing. I'd inform him of the plan when I returned to the room. Knowing Tony, he'd want to leave right away.

But just like we planned the bunker and got things going, we'd have to do the same. This wasn't a onetime move. This was long term survival.

Gil was waiting in the bay when I returned. My insides shook when I saw him, yet I tried to remain calm.

"Anna, I know you're angry."

"Gil, I'm not angry. I'm indifferent."

"I know you're probably wondering why I did this."

"I am."

"Anna," He leaned to me. "Things need protected. I have to keep up appearances. I wish I could say more. I can't. I didn't want to get rid of them, I had to. The long term plan had to be protected and to do so, I had to keep up appearances."

"I understand." I started to walk away.

“Do you?” he asked. “Because I hope you do. If I really didn’t care, if I really wanted them exiled, would I have given them as much as I did?”

Hearing that made me stop.

He was right. If he exiled them for crimes, why would he care if they survived?

“We’ll find them when we go out in a few weeks looking for survivors. We will. I gave them enough. And when they open the one food bag, they’ll find direction to a place they can go.”

“Where?” I asked. “Where did you tell them to go?”

“A depot I set up south of Pittsburgh. They can take shelter there. There are supplies.”

Was the depot he spoke of the fuel repository? I wanted to ask, but I didn’t want him to know I had all that information.

“What are you keeping up appearances for, Gil?”

“Not what ... who.”

A simply nod of my understanding and I walked away.

The who could only be one person.

Gwen.

Gwen came from the Presidential camp. She had information on things Gil had. That camp was the government, and like I originally thought, the government needed what Gil had.

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“He did what!” Tony blasted.

“Lower your voice.”

Tony’s face crinkled up as if it took every ounce of what he had to contain himself. “Lower my voice? You come in here, tell me this grand plan how we are going south after we skim from the top and stockpile, and then you just say, by the way, four of our people were tossed out?”

“Because I knew you’d get out of control if I told you that first.”

“Damn right. He kicked them out. Under our noses.”

“He gave them supplies.”

“Oh, isn’t he a bleeding heart.”

“And he said he told them where to go.”

“That’s bullshit,” Tony argued. “Why are you believing him?”

“Because they told me how much they had. Duke said they weren’t short supplied. Would Gil have sent them out there with it if he were really all that bad?”

“If he’s not the bad guy, here Anna, who is?” Tony asked.

“Gwen.”

“Gwen is a princess, she’s not a mastermind. She’s not smart

enough.”

“Tony she had all that information.” I said.

“So if she had it all, why do you think she wants more?”

“Because I think Gil has more.”

Tony shook his head. “This makes no sense. So he kicks out our guys?”

“Listen, I was thinking about this. He needs Gwen to see he is this big hard ass. He knows she knows things and doesn’t want that info to get back to the President’s bunker. So he appeases her. Joie even said she heard Gwen telling Gil he has too many secrets.”

Tony groaned. “Listen, this ‘I want to be Saint Anna, believing in the good of all’, has gone on too long. Okay? Here’s the deal. Gwen knows what Gil has because Gil told her. They faked the divorce so he could stock up for them both on the side. He had every intention of coming here as well as Gwen. You were a ruse. You were never meant to have this forever. Only to get here and get it operational and growing. We all did. Our job is done. Their first step to control everything. The government has nothing to do with this. It’s all Gwen and Gil.”

I shook my head in disagreement when a knock came at the door.

“Come in,” Tony called then looked to me. “If this is Gil, I’ll deck him.”

“You will not. You will stay calm. Pretend all is well until we have everything ready to ...”

The door opened. “I’m sorry,” Peter said. “Did you say come in?”

Tony grumbled. “What, Peter?”

“Hey.” I snapped. “Be nice to my friend.”

“Aw, that’s nice of you to say.” Peter smiled.

“Oh my God. Anna,” Tony said. “Grab what you need. I’m getting my daughter and we’re getting out of here.”

“What about Melissa and Nelly?” I asked. “Tom?”

“Me.” Peter said.

“We all can’t up and go without preparing.” I said.

Almost as if dismissing me, Tony looked at Peter. “What did you want?”

Peter held up the phone. “I started hacking. We were right. It was a dedicated communication line to one person. This ‘D’ person.” He handed Tony the phone. “You can read for yourself. The whole entire stream of conversation I got, they were back and forth. Some inconsequential. But the gist of the one conversation was, they had info on what Gil had but D was sure it wasn’t all. Gil has more. Just like we thought. Gwen was to find out what else remained and...” Peter grabbed the phone from Tony.

Frustrated, Tony tossed out his hands.

“Sorry,” Peter said. “Just looking for the one ... here. D stated, ‘it is imperative you keep track of where they find survivors, you know the plan is to round them up like it or not’ and Gwen replied”

Tony snatched the phone from his hand. He sighed out and read with little enthusiasm. “She wrote, ‘Slavery of the future. Continuity of mankind comes with a price.’” Tony handed me the phone.

I reread the words. “Sounds to me like concentration camps to get things running. Still wanna argue?”

“Anna, I need to read them all the way through. All the messages,” Tony said.

Peter added, “I still have a lot more hacking to do.”

I gave the phone back to Peter. “I think it’s pretty obvious. Do you believe me now?” I asked Tony. “Do you still believe Gil is the bad guy?”

“Bad guy or good guy, doesn’t matter,” Tony said. “All this leads me to believe there is going to be a clash of power, somewhere , somehow, and I don’t want to be around here when it all goes down. I just want to live my life and survive with you and my child. We don’t need Gil or the government for that. ” On those words, Tony looking slightly defeated in the argument and walked into Joie’s room.

Twenty-One – High Time

April 28

There were a lot of factors that went into our nearly two month post exile stay in the bunker. Weather played a huge part. One day cold, the next day snow, and then it would warm and start all over again.

According to Peter and his pal's at the space station, weather would be more than likely in the north east region of the United States be thirty degrees or more below normal for years to come. That tossed out any chance of growing anything outdoors.

We knew within five days of the exile that Craig and the others made it safely to the destination. By radio and using an awful 'hick' accent, Skyler identified himself as Rufus Dylan of Kansas. Dylan being keyword that he arrived at the Dylan campsite.

Rufus informed us he was staying put and looking for survivors and was getting ready to prep his farmland. His story was elaborate and had I not known it was Skyler, I would have believed the entire tale of living in an old missile silo. After all, we're we doing the same in Protocol One.

Melissa was another reason we didn't leave. She had far too much to do. Items that could be stored in the colder weather; seeds and so forth, all of which Tony and I took and hid on our many bogus scouting missions.

We didn't look for survivors. We stored everything in Elwood City. Including gas, even though I knew where the repository was.

The hardest things to sneak out were the chickens. We took them more recently. They were harder to get than medical supplies. Those we took while Tom was on watch and everyone slept.

It was a well crafted plan. We were taking from ourselves. It was easy at first, but then as the end of March neared, people showed up.

Some hearing the call, some Gil had reached out to.

We were at capacity in Protocol One. No longer was it the exuberant establishment for a few, it was housing more than we ever imagined and rations were stricter.

While all of that made up the delay in what we were going to do, the 'when and how' were crucial. Melissa pushed that it had to be soon or we'd miss a good harvest. Skyler slash Rufus said things were ready to plant.

But Gil and Gwen were always around.

Gwen especially.

I trusted Gil, and didn't say a word to him, but if Tony, Joie,

Melissa, Nelly, Tom, Peter, Baby John and I all up and left, Gil would chase right after us. We had to leave all at once. Together, making haste and distance before we were discovered missing.

Then the opportunity presented itself.

Gil had to go west for a few days. Apparently those who had taken over the west bunker had emerged and we reaching out, along with a group of survivors in Indiana.

All of that was what Gil told me.

"It's all part of the long term plan. There's a lot of people out there," he said. "I know it's a gamble but I have to get them onboard with us before the government does."

I understood that, I did. After all, I had read the deleted text messages of Gwen's. I wished I could tell Gil what I knew, but I couldn't tip my hand. Besides he probably already knew.

In fact a part of me truly felt guilty for slipping away while he was gone. I knew I'd eventually see him again, but he wouldn't understand my reasons.

As I said goodbye to him before he left, I embraced him and thanked him.

"I'll be back," Gil said. "You're not worried are you?"

"A little yeah."

"Don't be. I'll be fine."

My guilt over the fact that I knew I was going to hurt him was something I could not tell Tony. He was still convinced Gil's nice guy bit was all a ruse and I was a fool.

He didn't know Gil for all those years. I did.

It was all planned.

We'd give Gil two hours to make sure he didn't return. Tom would rig the exterior video feeds and the one in the bay, then he'd fake ill. The replacement guard would come in just before lunch. Melissa and Nelly moving about at that time wouldn't be unusual.

Tony and I were schedule for a quick run after lunch and made it known we were taking Joie with us so she could see the outside world.

They, along with the baby and Peter would meet at the Bay. Their getaway truck would leave just before Tony and I, that way if the guard figured out the feed he would only see us leaving with Joie.

Everything we wanted to take was squeezed into our typical survival gear we brought with us.

Even Joie had no clue what we were doing. Not telling her was a given when I realized my little plan to have her be my spy had the potential to backfire.

Suddenly the tomboyish girl was basking in all the girly things Gwen taught her. It irritated me and made me a little jealous that they

got along so well.

What the heck happened?

Was it really that important placing down your knife when done cutting meat, or how to position your napkin to let the wait staff know you are finished?

Or how to properly enter and exit a room like a lady.

Obviously Gwen left out ranting and raving in her lessons.

"They should be gone," Tony said as he sat down across from me at our lunch table. "Anna?"

"Um ... yeah," I replied, my eyes transfixed on Joie and Gwen. They always had a lesson over lunch. They sat together, both upright and proper. Gwen was saying something, I couldn't make it out.

"Did you hear me?" Tony asked. "Eat your soup. It could be a while."

I was anxious about leaving, and my meager lunch of soup and a hard roll wasn't appetizing enough. I missed the days when Nelly cooked. Some new guy took over. "Yes, I heard," I told him.

"None of them are here. What are you doing?"

"How did that happen?" I nodded toward Gwen and Joie.

"You. You caused it. You volunteered her. You set it up." Tony broke his roll. "Don't worry though, soon enough you can undo all the classy things Gwen taught her."

I gasped. "Are you saying I don't have class?"

"No. Eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Fine." Tony took my bowl of soup.

"They're dabbing the corners of their mouths. Daintily."

"Anna, come on. It's a post impact world. Who cares?"

"Obviously, Gwen. Of course, once she leaves here she has the bunker palace. You think she really likes Joie? I miss them fighting."

"I think she does. I think it's more like making up for what she lost."

His words caught my attention and I looked at him. "Excuse me?"

Tony paused as his mouth hovered the bowl to drink the soup. "Think, Anna. You of all people know this. Her daughter? Her first husband?"

I remembered and the second I did, I inhaled loudly and my hand shot to my mouth. "I forgot. Oh my God, I forgot. The plane crash."

"Yeah, she would have been Jackson's age. She was Joie's age. That's why I think she took a liking to her." Tony slurped the remainder of his soup in a way Gwen wouldn't approve and stood. "Speaking of which, it's time to go."

Again ... once more, I felt guilty. I didn't even like Gwen and I felt guilty for snatching Joie from her. I had to remind myself what Gwen

was up to. I watched Tony get Joie. Joie stood and did that ‘cheek to cheek puckered lips but not a kiss’ thing and happily walk with Tony toward me.

I actually waved at Gwen. She turned her nose up and looked away.

Guilt gone. At least at that moment.

“We ready?” Joie asked. “I can’t wait to see what it’s like out there,”

“We’re ready,” I said.

“Will I see a lot?” she asked.

Tony replied as we headed from the dining area. “More than you think.”

I took one last look back before leaving, my last look, and then the three of us, hand in hand, walked out.

Goodbye Protocol One.

Twenty-Two – Hidden

There was a certain feeling of emptiness that already accompanied my guilt. We pulled out of the gates of Protocol One and I wasn't happy. I wished that I were. I knew we were doing the right thing. It just felt empty.

Tony didn't portray anything but excitement, as if we were going on a long awaited family vacation.

We had just reached Elwood city when the radio call came in from the guard in the safe room.

He couldn't figure out the video feed problem.

"Worry about the exterior. Shut it down and restart," Tony told him. "The interiors aren't as important."

There was no mention of Nelly, Melissa, Tom or Peter. That was a good thing.

Another good sign was the Milestone National Bank. It was where had hidden the items. All of them were gone. A little note in the dust on the wall read 'Thanks, Pete' and we took comfort that they were on their way. Not exactly to South Carolina. We were meeting at the Pennsylvania, Maryland border.

They were to reach us on a different band, representing themselves under Rufus' identity and the Kansas camp if they had problems.

Joie turned into a million questions when we got to Elwood City. She wasn't scared, she was more in awe.

"Why is Peter's name on the wall?"

"What happened to all the people?"

"How did they live?"

"Did they all die?"

"Will we be meeting any dirty and smelly survivors, I want to practice my politeness that Gwen taught me."

"Gwen taught you how to be polite to smelly people." I asked.

"Oh, yes. Where are we going now?" she asked when we go back in the car.

"Pittsburgh. Pretty big city."

"Wow, I wish Gwen could have come."

I turned around and looked back at her. "Why do you like her so much? You weren't supposed to, you know."

Tony smirked. "Anna, let it go."

"I can't let it go. She talks about her all the time."

"I spend time with her," Joie answered.

"But you spend time with me."

"We don't do girl things. We just do things."

"I beg to differ. Two girls doing things together are called girl things."

Tony smirked. "It could be called something else."

"Tony." I barked.

Joie folded her arms and stared out the window. 'I think this is one of those times, where I politely bow out of the conversation.'

"Did Gwen teach you that?" I asked.

"Anna, let it go. Let her look out the window. She has a new world to see."

Tony was right. Even though we drove down a highway, it was a new world. The road for the most part was still covered with snow, it had melted some causing a slushing sound as we drove over it.

Everything was still the same, the cars that were abandoned were buried in snow. Joie watched every single second and turned with enthusiasm when the skyline came into view.

As we neared the city, I knew we wouldn't be long. There was no way to bring Larry and the others with us, but I wanted to tell them where to go, when they decided to leave. I tucked directions and information about Dylan in my pocket,

There was something about the snowfall when we were there previously, that gave the city a peaceful feeling, almost beautiful. A barren one, but peaceful and quiet. It looked untouched, except for the few buildings that had been burned.

However with the melting snow, things just looked dirty and ugly. We pulled into the north side as we had done before but this time, we splashed into water. The whole area was encompassed. The river had rose and washed up on the streets.

Tony immediately slowed down and then stopped. This time a good block from the casino and nearer to the building that Mike and Gina had lived.

"We're not going in any further," Tony said.

"Are we gonna flood out?" I asked.

"We could. Depends how deep it is and it's hard to tell. The ground could have given away."

Joie spoke up. "Can you imagine what is gonna happens when all the snow melts."

"That won't be long." I looked back at then faced Tony. "Something isn't right. It looks empty."

"Um, Anna, it looked empty before."

"No, there's no smoke. Nothing. No heat streaks." I grabbed the door handle.

"What are you doing?"

"I have to go find Larry, give him the location. We can't radio it."

Tony reached out, grabbing my arm to stop me. "They may have

left, Anna. With the flood waters, it's conceivable."

"There were hundreds here, Tony, how were they getting out of here."

"A boat?" Joie said.

Tony pointed back at her. "She has a great point. They could have taken a boat."

I shook my head. "No. I doubt. Let me just run to the sub, I'll be right back."

"Anna, why don't we just beep the horn. It's a dead city. Someone will hear."

"I'll be back. Don't leave the Humvee. We know your history with that."

"Fine." Tony said then beeped the horn.

It made me jump. "Stop."

"We don't need to be quiet." He honked again.

"Tony!" I yelled then swung my leg out and stepped from the Humvee.

That first step told me I should have worn my Arctic Armor boots, even though the water only came just above the ankle I could feel it seeping through the laces of my boots.

"I'll be fifteen minutes. Stay put." I shut the door and began my journey, focusing on the casino as my landmark.

River Road was nowhere to be seen. The water was cold with bits of ice and immediately, I could feel my legs tensing. I had to move fast. In just a half a block the water hit my knees. I gazed outward to judge, it looked as if the north side of the city was in the middle of the lake. There was no distinction where the river started and ended, it just was wide and deep.

Tony honked three more times and I hated that he did so. I jumped from my skin with each noise.

My body started to shiver and as I neared the casino the water hit my thighs. It didn't take long for my legs to cramp. I wasn't moving fast enough.

Honk.

"Tony, son of a bitch." My heart raced. Not that it wasn't racing enough from the cold water.

Was he beeping to tell me to hurry or to come back?

I turned around. "Is there a problem!" I yelled.

Tony leaned out of the Humvee. "What?"

"I said is there a problem? You're honking!"

"No, I'm making noise." He beeped. "I figure if I make enough someone will come out and you can stop disappearing in the river."

"I'll be fine."

He honked.

At a volume he couldn't hear, I muttered "Asshole" and turned back around. When I did, coming from the side of the casino was Mike.

"Anna?" he said, his voice quivered and he sluggishly and hurriedly made his way to me. "Oh, thank God."

"Mike." I smiled when I saw him, but the smile fell. Something was wrong, I saw it on his face. "What's going on?"

"What are you doing here?"

"We're moving out. Away from Protocol One. We have a place, we wanted to tell Larry so he can lead the next pilgrimage out."

"He's gone." Mike said out of breath.

"What do you mean gone?"

"He's gone. Everyone is gone. I'm the only one left."

I was confused. Mike was clearly upset. "Mike explain gone?"

"They aren't here."

"Did they leave already? Do you know where they went?"

Mike shook his head. "No, when it all went down, I got scared. I hid. I was even afraid when I heard the horn. But I heard you yelling."

I took hold of his arm and led him back to the Humvee.

When we arrived, Tony stepped out. "What's going on?"

"Tony, this is Mike. He is the young man that hit you with the Humvee."

"Oh, well, then it's nice to meet you," Tony said with sarcasm then looked at me. "What's going on?"

"They're all gone." I said.

"Everyone?" Tony asked.

"Yes." Mike answered. "They came in, and rounded everyone up. Larry got shot, he was still alive and ..."

"Whoa. Whoa. Wait." Tony held up his hands. "Larry was shot? By who?"

"The military. They came in and took everyone. The ones who resisted they forced. I hid."

"When?" Tony asked.

"A week ago. Before the flood."

"Do you see, Tony?" I asked. "Just like the messages we read on the phone. Take them all. The military. The government. This is what Gil is warning us about."

"Yeah, well it's not our problem, Anna." Tony argued.

"Yes, it is. If they are grabbing people, then what is to say they won't get us or Craig and them?"

"Well, for starters," Tony said. "They don't know where we are or Craig. We led them to these people. We just need to move on. They may still be in the area."

"Come on Mike, get in," I said and opened my door.

“Wait. What? He’s coming?” Tony asked.

“We can’t just leave him here, alone.”

“Oh my God, here we go again.” Tony got in the Humvee and slammed the door.

After giving Mike a ‘don’t worry about it’ look, he got in the back and I, also got into the Humvee.

Tony slowly backed up to turn around. “I’m sorry this happened, Anna, I am. It’s not right. But like I said. There is nothing we can do.”

“Not really.”

“What do you mean?” He asked.

“I have an idea,” I said. “Go back to Protocol One.”

Twenty-three – Plan G

Suffice to say, *Let's head back to Protocol One* was not a popular suggestion to Tony.

At first he flat out said, "No." Then asking me if I were nuts, he again, said, "No."

"Tony this is not an option. Go back."

"Anna, you are not making decisions for us all. This isn't the Anna movement anymore. Okay? No."

"I have a plan."

"Yeah, you know what? We had a plan too. In fact that plan is already being implemented. Now is not the time to play hero or run back to Gil. Gil's gone for a few days anyhow. Without risking a radio breach, how are you going to inform him?"

"I could leave Mike there." I suggested. "He can inform Gil and watch for situations."

"Yes, because we all know how well you do picking out spies. We still have Ben there. Going back is going to cause problems, or for it not to happen at all."

"No," I argued. "It won't. The plan will work."

"Why are you coming up with a plan anyhow?" Tony asked. "I'm sorry, these people are not our problem."

"I beg to differ. You are alive because of those people."

"Yes, well ..." Tony peered to the rearview mirror. "I was put at death's door by one of those people." He looked at Mike.

"Dude, low blow," Mike replied. "No fair. It was an accident."

"You shouldn't have taken the Humvee in the first place, should you?"

"Tony, enough." I snapped. "This is one incident that will affect us all eventually. The rest of our lives, living, hiding, looking over our shoulder."

"Oh, stop being melodramatic. And get it out of your mind. We are not going back to Protocol One."

It was then Joie showed she was paying attention. "Why aren't we going back to Protocol One? Don't we live there?"

"Yeah, Tony." I raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"You know what?" Tony glared at me. "You have issues. It's Anna's way or no way without regard to what is best for everyone."

"This is what is best for everyone. I'm not just talking just us."

"And you think going back is going to all of the sudden stop this all from happening?"

"I doubt it, but I do think it will get us back the group from Pittsburgh or let us know where they are."

“Why do we care, Anna? Not to sound cold, but why?” Tony asked.

“Because we caused this. We went to Pittsburgh. You got hurt. Everyone knew they were there. We led them to the survivors. It is our responsibility to at least try to help them.”

“And this will be done by going back to Protocol One.”

“Just briefly,” I said. “Because I have...”

“A plan,” Tony cut me off. “Yes, I know.” Disgruntled, he didn’t continue south. In fact, against his better judgment, he headed back toward Protocol One.

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He apologized to Tony at least three times for hitting him with the Humvee. Mike was sincere, then again, he was young and we found out he was only nineteen.

“I’m sorry I hit you.”

“Let it go,” Tony told him.

“I would if you would.”

“I did.”

“Then why did you bring it up?”

“I didn’t. Anna did. She said you were the one who hit me,” Tony said.

“And you made a comment. That’s not letting it go. I need you to know it was an accident, and I would do the spy thing for you if you need me to.”

“If you want to stay at Protocol One, we will leave you there. But the spy thing won’t work.”

“Yeah,” Joie added. “They figure things out. They’re cunning.”

Quickly, I looked back at Joie. “That’s an odd word choice.”

“Gwen taught me.”

“Figures.”

“Anna.” Tony warned softly.

Joie continued, “She knew right away what you were up to. She said she was up to the same thing, but ended up liking me. Yeah,” she sighed out. “Everyone was using me. That’s okay, there was really nothing else to do.”

I looked at Tony then to Joie. “I’m sorry, sweetie that was really wrong of me.”

“It’s okay,” She shrugged. “I learned lots of cool things in finishing school.”

“Man,” Mike sat back. “You people at Protocol One are tough. You make the kids go to finishing school.”

That made me laugh. But it was time to put my head in the game.

We neared Protocol One.

As we made our approach up the road, I lifted the radio and not without a quizzical look from Tony. "This is Anna, Protocol One come in."

"This is Protocol One."

"Hey, did you guys fix the cameras?" I asked. "Tony wanted me to check."

"Not yet. We're working on it. Peter must have taken a walk. we can't locate him. Over."

"And without exteriors, you can't see if he's outside. Keep us posted."

"Will do. Out."

"What was that?" Tony asked.

"Just pull in."

Tony did.

There were no guards outside other than at the gate, and there wasn't a problem with us going right in.

"Go to the bay doors."

"Then what?" Tony pulled up to the bay doors and stopped.

"Keep it running, wait here." I reached for the door.

"Anna, what are you doing?"

"I'll be right back." I opened the door. "I'm handling this."

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The bay was empty, no one was there. Typically that was where Spencer hung out. But Gil saw no need to have someone on the bay, not with cameras.

I made my way down the stairs and peeked in every feasible location, until I found her in her room. Which was typically where Gwen spent most of her time.

I knocked on her door and when she answered, the smell of perfume wafted out.

"Anna?" Gwen questioned. "I thought you guys were out."

"We were, are actually. Joie got a little traumatized and is asking for you and only you."

"Is she alright?"

"I don't know."

"Where is she?"

"Up in the bay."

Surprising me, without hesitation, Gwen grabbed that obnoxious fur coat, pulled her door closed and raced right by me. I didn't even know the woman could run.

She was wearing heels oddly enough.

She click clacked her way up the metal steps and I stayed close behind. Out of breath she arrived at the bay.

"Is she in the Humvee?" Gwen turned around to me.

When she did, I lifted my pistol to her forehead.

"Oh my God."

"Listen to me. Turn around, walk to the Humvee. Now."

"What are you doing?"

"Turn around. Go." I said calmly.

Gwen listened, turning slowly. "Do I need to raise my hands?"

"Nope. Walk. Quickly. Don't scream."

"Please. I wouldn't reduce myself to that."

I stayed close to her inching her with the pistol. When we got to the Humvee, I opened the door. Tony's face was priceless.

"What is going on?" Tony asked.

"In," I informed Gwen.

"Hi Gwen!" Joie said excitedly.

After making sure the child lock was on, I closed the Humvee and walked to my door.

"Drive." I instructed Tony.

"Why is she here?"

"Seems," Gwen spoke up. "I have been kidnapped."

Tony's eyes widened, he looked in the rearview mirror then me. His eyes shifted down to the pistol. "Anna, what the hell?"

"Go. Please. We have time to make up."

"You just kidnapped her at gunpoint?"

"I did." I noticed he wasn't moving. "Tony, I'm serious. Fucking drive."

"You've lost it."

"Whoa," Mike said. "You people are crazy. Kidnapping, finishing school."

"So says the car thief," I rebutted.

"Low blow."

I glared at Tony. "We're wasting time."

"Appease her, Tony, go." Gwen said. "I'm fine back here."

"Where am I driving, Anna?" Tony asked.

"Follow the plan. We'll meet the others, then we head to Texas."

"Texas? As in Damnation Alley, Texas?"

"Go."

Tony grunted with a bite to his bottom lip, put the vehicle in drive and pulled out. The guard at the gate didn't even flinch as we drove back through.

"I thought you had a plan." Tony said. "Had you shared this with me, I would have advised against it."

"This is going to work," I said. "Trust me. I told you I'd handle it."

“Yeah, well, let me tell you something, Anna. This isn’t handling it.” He glanced at me with a side eye look. “This is insane.”

Bunker Crew – Peter

It was kind of thrilling. The great escape, even though no one really noticed or said anything to us.

“It’s not a prison,” Tom said. “Of course, they aren’t going to think twice.”

We stopped and grabbed the supplies, the chickens were a bit unnerving. Four chickens in cages in a closed in van space was a bit much. Add to that Baby John was fussy, the two hour trip to the Pennsylvania border and meeting spot seemed like a ten hour journey.

I wondered if Anna had room for me in the Humvee. Then again, it was Anna, She had this unnerving ability to grab strangers and bring them along.

We pulled over at the meeting place, Roy’s Body and Auto Shop. He parked the van to the side and waited.

Oddly, we didn’t see a single person, there was still a lot of snow on the ground and the roadways seemed at times almost impossible. Even though the snow had started to melt, it hadn’t been removed at all in the first thaw, so it was a bumpy ride.

Chickens squawked and the baby wailed.

We expected to have to wait for them. But when the time frame moved from one hour to two, I started to get worried.

Melissa made the comment that more than likely, we wouldn’t make it to the West Virginia fueling repository before dark.

Then finally, I saw them rolling down the road. Nearly two hours after we expected them. As they neared, I looked up to the sky, it was getting dark, but I knew we had a two hours. If we didn’t waste time.

Tom had been sitting on a duffle bag and stood. “Did they bring someone?”

“Joie,” Melissa added.

“Looks like more. She’s not that big.” Tom added. “I can see two figures. One is a guy.”

“What did you expect?” I asked. “It’s Anna.”

“And ...” Tom said. “Looks like Gwen.”

All of us blurted out, “What!”

The Humvee stopped and Tony was the only one to get out.

He approached us.

“Tony?” Tom tilted his head. “Is that Gwen?”

Tony grumbled. “It is. We have a kidnapping situation on hand.”

“What do you mean?” Tom asked.

“Anna kidnapped Gwen. Seems she is taking her to Texas. Or rather I am.”

“Can you do that?”

"I'm gonna have to."

Tom cringed. "This isn't good."

"Tell me about it."

"Why did she kidnap her?"

"We arrived in Pittsburgh and everyone was gone. Not just gone, according to that boy in the car, those who didn't want to go were taken by the military."

I laughed. "Oh my God, that is so great. She kidnaps the Vice President's daughter to use her as hostage bait, get into Texas camp and find out where Pittsburgh survivors went."

"This is funny?" Tony asked.

"Actually, yeah. Anna has some balls doing this. It's very Liam Neeson like. Don't you think? I so want to be there when she goes to Damnation Alley."

Seemingly ignoring me, Tom looked back at Tony. "What are you going to do?"

"Well..." Tony exhaled. "I can turn around and take her back to Protocol One. But I can't do that. We could bring her to South Carolina. I won't do that. Or simply take her to Texas. Which I don't want to do."

"I have an idea." I lifted my hand. "Why don't you and Joie go to South Carolina and I'll drive with Anna to Texas?"

Tom nodded. "That's a good idea."

"No." Tony waved out. "That is not a good idea. It's a horrible idea. No."

"Tony, you can't go to Texas with Anna. You know that."

"I don't have a choice."

Tom pointed to me. "Peter goes."

"No I have to do this," Tony said. "I'll go."

"But what are you going to do if ..."

"I'll handle it when and if the time comes."

I peered at both of them. "Am I missing part of the conversation?"

Both of them face me and said at the same time. "No."

"Just asking. But we better get moving if we want to get to the fuel place before dark."

"Gather up everyone," Tony said. "We'll head out. Bunk there for the night and in the tomorrow I head to Texas."

"Can I go?" I asked. "Please."

Tony turned and kept walking back to his Humvee.

"I'll take that as a yes," I said to Tom.

Truth was, whether Tony liked it or not, there was absolutely no way I was missing Anna bringing Gwen, at gun point, to Damnation Alley.

The sign just outside of the town where the fuel repository was hidden read, "God Watches Tucker WV"

And as we pulled into the small town, I had to wonder of God actually did.

Nestled in the valley, surrounded by West Virginia mountains, the small mining town was untouched by the comet. Perhaps nature protected it or even God, whatever the reason, the only signs that anything remotely apocalyptic happened there was the snow. Even that was melting.

Population four hundred and twelve and not a soul was seen in the small town.

Why was that?

It was unscathed.

We found the fuel with ease and then we set up camp in the middle of the street.

It was starting to get dark, but while there was still some daylight remaining, I decided to walk around. See what I could.

The first building I entered was the police station. A small house like structure built of brick, single story Andy Griffith style. It wasn't in disarray. Nothing was out of order. It was there I discovered what happened to the residents of Tucker. Why they weren't in the community protected by nature.

They had retreated to the mines to be deep below the surface for when the temperatures rose.

I wondered if they were waiting or if they perished, buried alive in a collapsed mine when the earth shook.

The town was untouched, even shelves still contained items.

I wondered as we hunkered down for the night, why, with a place as safe, protected and hidden as Tucker West Virginia, we were even going anywhere else.

Twenty-Four – Tuckered Out

The vehicles parked sideways one north, the other south and a half a block apart to protect our little camp.

The town was so secluded, it made me wonder if we needed Tony and Tom to play watch guard all night.

But I suppose the campfire was a calling card, especially if the Military was in the area.

The temperatures had dropped and I even suggested that Melissa sleep in the van with the baby. Her reaction, along with Nelly's was the same. They wanted to enjoy sleeping outside, not hundreds of feet below the surface. I could understand that. It wasn't that cold that blankets, sleeping rolls and a fire wouldn't work.

Mike was a nice addition to our group, I wish we'd met him under different circumstances. His presence was jaded in Tony's eyes by the fact that he stole the Humvee and in doing so, killed his girlfriend and damned near killed Tony.

He pretended well, but I could see the lost look in his eyes that he carried that guilt.

Peter brought up a good point about Tucker. He believed it was probably the best place to set up long term living, seeing how it was spared because of its geographical location. He even stated that if the South Carolina place wasn't up to par, he'd move back to Tucker. Melissa said the land was good and farming would work.

Unfortunately, those who fell in love with the small town charm of Tucker had to go to South Carolina. The guys had already been there weeks prepping it. Unless of course they wanted to stay behind, which they didn't want to do.

No one was sleeping and very little talking took place.

Except Gwen.

Something was different about her. Aside from the fact that she looked completely out of place in that big giant fur coat and shiny black boots with heels, she never brought up her kidnapping. She sat on a cinderblock, staring at the fire, nibbling on an MRE cracker while sitting next to Joie.

I was on Joie's other side, shifting between watching them and Tony.

"This is so unique," Gwen said. "Would this be considered camping?"

Melissa chuckled. "A little, in a survivor way."

"Oh, then it's a treat. I always wanted to go camping."

"You never camped?" Joie asked.

"I did. But there was always a deluxe RV with all the luxuries

involved.”

“Maybe because you didn’t want to go without your hair straightener or shower,” Peter said.

“Maybe.” Gwen shrugged. “I just know I always wanted to go. Do a family camping trip. Get lost in the woods. That sort of thing. Not that I’d be any good at it. They don’t teach you that stuff in finishing school.” She giggled as if she just told the funniest joke.

“How come you didn’t have kids?” Joie asked her.

That caught my attention.

“I did. Do. I really don’t know how to answer that. I had a little girl,” Gwen said. “She would be nineteen right now.”

“What’s her name?”

“Amy,” Gwen replied.

“Did she go to finishing school?”

“No. Sadly, Amy Well, Amy’s dad was a senator like Gil. They were on the campaign trail and meeting my father. Their plane crashed. They died.”

Joie gasped. “Both of them?”

“Yes.”

“Your husband and your daughter?”

“Yes.”

“How old was she?”

“Your age. You’re six now. She was five. With fire red hair.” She shook her head. “My goodness was she a pistol. Sassy and smart like you.”

“Is that why you like me so much?” Joie asked. “Because I’m like her?”

“No, Joie, I like you because you’re you.”

Immediately, upon hearing that I stood. Not because it bothered me but because Gwen said something human, genuine, and nice. And I did not want to put human qualities on Gwen.

I made my way over to Tony and I guess he was listening, how could he not? Sound travelled in a quiet empty town.

“Jealous again?” Tony asked.

“No.” I answered and climbed and stood next to him. “I have faced the fact that I am not a kid magnet. I never was.”

“Really? Because you do really well with Joie.”

“I do the mother thing well with Joie. Nah, I wasn’t that mother that all the kids liked. Honestly, none of Jackson’s friends ever asked to stay over. I never was the mom with all the kids at the house or the cool mom.”

Tony nudged me. “Well, if you ask me. You were pretty cool with Jackson.”

“Thanks.”

“So, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Have you given any more thought to your plan? I mean, let’s say it works. Let’s say we get to Damnation Alley, best case scenario, they tell you where everyone is. What then? What if they are in Kansas? You gonna deviate from the plan, go to Kansas and pull a, how did Peter put it? A Liam Neeson?”

I laughed. “Not quite sure I can do that. The Liam Neeson thing. Best case scenario is they let them go. But I don’t want the government to know where we’re going. Maybe we’ll just play it by ear.”

“That’s not a way to do things,” Tony said. “You’re going down there with a hostage situation.”

“I know you believe it was the wrong thing to do.”

“It was spur of the moment, emotionally charged and not the right thing to do. But you did it and now you have to see it through. This can all be for naught, Anna. You may not find the Pittsburgh people. I hate that you put me in this position.”

“You don’t have to go with me to Texas. Peter is going.”

Tony shook his head. “Oh, that makes me feel better. No I’m in this. We could have said it sucked about Pittsburgh, put it behind us and left. The world is not your responsibility. You make choices without thinking about those involved. Promise me in the future you will consider others.”

“Am I that bad?”

“No. You just make bad choices with good intentions.” He leaned forward and kissed me. “Go back to the fire. I got this.”

“When will you rest?”

“Oh, I plan on sleeping quite a bit on the trip to Texas. That’s thirteen hundred miles.”

Hearing that made me realize how long of a journey it was. Yes, I made the snap decision to take Gwen. A part of me now hinged in debate on whether or not it was the right thing to do. It felt like the right thing at the time. But with each hour and each mile, it made less sense.

Like Tony said I made bad choices with good intentions. This was one of them. Like it or not, right or wrong, like the flood water in Pittsburgh, I was in knee deep.

I was going to see it through no matter what the outcome.

Twenty-Five - Face the music

One of the best talents I had was the ability to read a good old fashioned paper map. My father was a firm believer that it would be the ‘Sense of Direction’ death to us all when we lost the ability to navigate via an electronic device.

We maintained radio silence and even though it had been two whole days plus since we left Protocol One, we hadn’t heard anything on the radio.

The trip from West Virginia was almost uneventful. I was able to maintain highway driving. Once in a while we ran into congestion of abandoned cars that spread all four lanes. That was when I put the Humvee through its paces . Going off road.

It wasn’t a trip void of survivors. We ran into them a lot. The cities we passed, showed remnants of the heat. Buildings were blackened and burned, there was an abundance of this thick, black liquid everywhere. Like black paint. Peter said it was the ash that had mixed with ice and became its own type of mud. It was everywhere.

Sometimes we would see people wandering the roads, just walking. We passed a huge camp of survivors outside of Louisville. We didn’t stop. In fact, we only stopped once and that was for a family. The woman and two children were seated on their belongings outside of a clearly looted convenience store. I slowed down to check on them and that was when the father came out guns blazing.

He was protecting his family.

I admired that. We offered them food and water. They accepted, but we moved on. I wanted to tell them where we were going, but I promised Tony I wouldn’t.

The further we traveled the more I worried that I put Joie in harm’s way. Tony didn’t seem concerned with that, which made me curious. Perhaps it was the relationship between Gwen and Joie that secured her safety.

Tony slept a lot, I drove and Peter did most of the talking. I think the best conversation of the trip came when Gwen asked how we knew about Tucker West Virginia.

“You,” I told her.

“Me? How do I know? Surely, Gil told you.”

“No, Gil told me nothing. Your BlackBerry did. Seems you left it in that cool black bag inside this Humvee.”

“Do you have it?” Gwen asked. “My scarf is in there. I love that scarf.”

“It’s ... it’s in the back.” I peered in the rearview mirror. “What were you doing with all that information?”

“Hoping to get more,” Gwen said. “But there was nothing on that phone but those files.”

“Who is D?” I asked.

“My father. Do you have the phone? We should call and...”

“No,” I cut her off. “We won’t call. We’re just showing up.”

“We hacked your phone you know,” Peter said. “Found all kinds of stuff.”

Gwen folded her arms. “I bet you had a grand time looking at the nude selfies.”

My foot instinctively moved from the gas, I swerved the wheel as I looked back. “Peter?”

“Damn it,” Peter said. “I never looked for photos. I didn’t get that far. I did enjoy your short stories. They were actually really good.”

“Really?” Gwen asked. “Thank you.”

They conversed about her ambitions to be a writer, and how she wrote the stories as her way to keep her daughter alive.

God! I hated when she sounded like a nice person.

That conversation was before we stopped for the night. By that point everyone but Tony was exhausted and he held watch while we camped out quietly on the side of the road.

We left without hesitation at sunup. I just wanted the mission over with.

Other than the effects of the comet, we watched the temperature change as well. The Humvee thermometer read from a cool forty degrees in West Virginia all the way to seventy-four when we crossed the Texas Border.

It was at that point Gwen finally removed her coat.

In fact, as we neared the complex, she had to navigate the rest of the way.

“Are you sad that you left our bunker?” Joie asked. “That Anna made you leave.”

“No,” Gwen answered. “I miss my father. I miss him very much. Doesn’t matter how old you get Joie, there’s a special bond with daughter’s and dads and you will miss them when you don’t see them.”

Then Joie asked me. “Do you miss your dad, Anna?”

“Every single day of my life.” I wanted to add that even more so since we pulled into his home state of Texas.

“See?” Gwen said. “And this complex is so much nicer than Protocol One. You’ll see. By now I am sure they finished erecting the topside buildings. We were living above ground when we left. There’s even a playground.”

“We’re not staying,” I said.

“Yeah,” Peter added. “Anna will probably be shot.”

Joie gasped.

“Peter.” I scolded. “Why would you say that?”

“Um, you kidnapped the vice president’s daughter at gunpoint.”

Tony grumbled from his semi sleeping state. “She won’t get shot.”

“Hung maybe?” Peter guessed.

I groaned, Joie let out a panicked scream and thankfully, Gwen instructed me to turn.

At first I thought it was a wrong turn, a set up, because we went down this deeply tree lined road for what seemed to be forever.

When we emerged it was the light at the end of the tunnel. A small open area led to a huge gated iron wall. It looked like some sort of zombie fortress.

There was a guard booth out front. I slowed down and Tony sat up.

“We’re here,” I said to Tony. Then slipped my gun behind my back.

At the gate I came to a complete halt and Gwen wound down her window when the guard approached the Humvee.

“Mrs. Jenner,” the guard said. “I didn’t expect to see you back.”

“Homesick. Can you notify my father I have returned?”

“Yes, ma’am. He should be in his office. They’ve been built since you left. Section A-3.” The guard looked at me. “Through the gate, first right, and you’ll see Building A on your left, ma’am.”

I nodded in thanks.

The guard stepped back and the gate rolled open.

“That was easy,” I said softly as I drove through. I believed they knew, that somehow Gwen conveyed some code to the guard and no sooner would we stop, we’d be surrounded by military men.

That wasn’t the case.

Uninterrupted we drove down the small road. I turned into the lot for Building A and Vice President Don Hutchins raced out the door.

“Is that your dad?” Joie asked.

“It is.” Gwen answered.

A distinguished handsome man in his seventies and fit like a man in his forties. His hair was white and he wore a tee shirt and blue jeans.

He ran to us the moment the Humvee stopped.

“Shit.” Gwen clicked the handle of the door. “Child lock is on. Can someone let me out?”

“Oh my God. I’m gonna look like the chauffeur.” I put the car in gear, opened my door, stepped out and reached for the back door. I had it planned. Open Gwen’s door, pull my gun, and show my seriousness.

But as soon as I opened Gwen’s door, she blasted out and into her

father's arms.

Damn it, I thought. It wasn't going as I hoped.

Their embrace was long and I stood by impatiently. Tony held Joie on his hip and he and Peter stood by me.

"This is a surprise," the said. "Something wrong? What is going on?"

"Mr. Vice President," I said. "I—"

"Actually, the president now. Unfortunately he passed away. Call me Don," he replied and held out his hand.

I didn't take it and with a confused look, he retracted his hand, rolling his fingers.

"Oh, ." Gwen stepped back. "Sorry I didn't call. It was so spur of the moment. I was kidnapped."

His eyes widened. "Kidnapped? By whom?"

"Me." I reached behind me for the gun and I felt a hand stopping me. I shifted my eyes. Tony shook his head.

"You kidnapped my daughter to bring her here?" Don asked with shock. "That just seems odd."

Gwen waved out her hand. "There's confusion. She needs answers. You can clear it up. This is Anna. That precious little girl is my new friend, Joie." She pivoted in an upbeat way as if she weren't a hostage or angry. "This is Peter Fleishman."

"Peter." Don shook his hand. "My God, Mulligan speaks highly of you as do our people at the space station."

"Really?" Peter shook his head. "Wow. Thanks. That's cool."

"And of course," Gwen said. "You know Tony."

Stop.

My heart dropped.

Gwen said something, I don't know, I stood in shock.

"Anna?" Don called my name, drawing my attention. "Come inside. Maybe we can find out what this is all about."

"Yeah. Yeah. Maybe we can." I said in shock and followed them into the building. The whole time I was suck on the one line Gwen said.

You know Tony.

Did he? How?

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The beat of my heart sounded like a steady drum in my ear. Fast and out of control, my blood pressure soared. Filled with anxiety, the brief wait in the quaint office of the new president seemed like an eternity.

Peter knew. Without saying a word, he knew where my mind was.

He kept calling me, trying to get me to talk. I didn't answer.

Tony kept trying to speak to me and I ignored him. I stared at the photos on Don's desk, waiting for his return.

It was a mistake. Something was wrong.

Suddenly my reason for being there, the Pittsburgh survivors, was lost.

Gwen took Joie for a walk, that was a good idea. Joie didn't need to be around.

Finally, Don returned.

"I'm sorry it took so long," He set a folder before me. "Gwen told me what brought this on, told me some details, and I wanted to..."

"How do you know Tony? Or don't know?" I asked abruptly.

Don sat down, he looked at Tony. "She doesn't know?"

"No." Tony said.

Did I wheeze? Because I was pretty sure the shock sucked every bit of air out of me.

"Wait. Wait." Peter said. "I am so lost."

"Join the club," I replied. "How do you know Tony?"

"I'll answer that," Tony said. "I have been working with him since the beginning. Well, he and the President."

There was a physical reaction that accompanied the 'I have been a fool' revelation and it rendered me unable to move or speak.

"You what!" Peter jumped up. "You have been part of the enemy the whole time? No wonder they knew about Pittsburgh. You took them right there."

"Hold up," Don said. "We aren't the bad guys here."

"Bullshit." Peter blasted. "Explain this." He slid the BlackBerry to him. "Explain that exchange. Gwen talks about people being slaves. You guys making them slaves."

"Not us." Don reviewed the phone. "I remember this conversation. It isn't us. She was referring to Gil. We need to locate the survivor camps to protect them from Gil. Because we knew that was his entire plan all along."

"No." I shook my head. "Gil is not a bad person."

"Anna," Tony said, stepping to me. "I know this isn't what you want to hear."

"You!" I shouted. "Are the last person I want to speak to right now. Back the fuck away. Your involvement with Gwen and this place, I don't care. I want to know why you..." I looked at Don. "Insist that Gil is the bad one here."

"It's all here." Don pushed the folder forward. "When we found out Gil hired Tony, we approached him. We didn't care what Gil did as long as it wasn't made public, but when he started his own military, forming it with some of the less reputable militia, we knew he was up

to more than just protecting you and Jackson. You were a ruse, a cover, for a grand plan for his domination.”

I laughed. A maniacal laughter. “This is ridiculous. Gil is some sort of Dr. Evil. No. World domination. That’s insane.”

“It’s not world domination,” Don said. “It’s resource domination and he has it, right now. He has more than we do. We can’t reach out and help people. His militia has taken over four of our stockpile sites. They already, from what we know are beginning to farm regions with all the research your agricultural person did. He needs to man the farms, the rebuilding of cities with survivors. So he recruits them. If they don’t join, he forces them. Labor camps. In our laxity we didn’t secure and protect as many armed forces as we should have. Tony’s job, after reporting what all he did, was to let us know when and if Gil arrived at Protocol One. Once Gil arrived, we knew he would be setting up his plan.”

“To rule the world?” I asked. “What difference does it make if Gil has control?”

“Then he controls what each woman, man and child eats.”

“And that is different than you, how?” I asked.

“We want people to control their own food, rebuild, and grow their own food. That is what we want,” Don answered. “We don’t want those survivors to be dependent on us. That’s the difference. Our job as the government is to rise from the ashes, establish a government again, and help people rebuild. Gil wants to say, ‘Look what I got. You want it, this is what you do.’”

“Do you know how hard this is to believe?”

Don nodded. “I would think the missing survivors from Pittsburgh is proof enough.”

“How do I know you didn’t take them?” I asked. “Mike told us it was the military.”

“And we don’t have the man power to take a camp of survivors let alone a city. Gil does. Hell, we lost forty troops to him last month. He pulls them in. We can’t protect the cities and survivors camps. We can warn them and help them protect themselves. We need to know where they are. That was Gwen’s job. The most unsuspecting spy against him.”

I fluttered a laugh in sarcasm. “I have news for you. Everyone knew she was a spy. Especially Tony.”

“I suspected,” Tony said. “Like you. But I had no idea she knew me.”

Don added. “Gwen is pretty smart. She knew we had two men inside. She guessed it.”

I didn’t need confirmation. I knew Tom was the second man. “So what was Gwen’s job exactly?”

“Get close to Gil. Gain his trust again. Be part of the plan. Pass it to us so we could try to protect these people. Maybe even recruit for us. Get our resources back. Our fuel. Our food stockpiles. But ...even giving him one of our doctors wasn't good enough. He never mentioned Pittsburgh to her.”

I tossed out my hands. “So this was all in vain? You have no idea where he took those people.”

Don shook his head. “None. We think Midwest, but we aren't sure. Maybe if Gwen would have stayed. But I doubt it. Now we are back to square one. We have no one there. Imagine, Anna, living in this world, and knowing the only way you can feed your family is to do what you are told. No choice. No starting your own farm. The world was wiped clean, and Gil now has a clean slate to create his perfect world.”

“Giltatorship,” Tony said.

I pulled the folder to me and closed it. “May I hold this and read it?”

“Absolutely,” Don said. “Gwen told me there are others. Your doctor, agricultural person. She didn't know where they went but said you are setting up. Some of them were exiled. Anna, if you sent them to a place Gil had, we can't protect them. Gil will eventually go to his property and God help you all, because unless you have an Army of your own, he'll take that place back. Tell me where they are. We can...”

“No. But then again, I'm sure Tony will.” Holding the folder, I stood up and turned.

“Anna,” Don softly spoke my name. “Can I speak to you ... alone?”

I paused.

Don shifted his eyes from Tony to Peter. “Alone.”

I waited, frozen where I was as Tony and Peter left.

Once they did, Don asked. “Where were you going when you stood?”

“I don't know.”

“Please sit.”

I did.

Don folded his hands on his desk. “I know you are feeling very confused right now.”

“To say the least.”

“You kidnapped my daughter. You directed your exiled people to what you thought was a safe haven. You came here to find... how many Pittsburgh survivors?”

“Over a hundred.”

“Why?” he asked.

“They're good people. And I failed. I failed those survivors, I failed

my own people ...” I sighed out with a scoff. “I failed all the way around.”

“No. You can still help them all. Listen to me,” He leaned over his folded hands. “I have something to ask of you.”

Twenty-six - FULL Circle

I went home.

Ironically, the Damnation Alley Bunker was a mere fifty miles from my midland home. After my conversation with Don, I left, alone, and I went home.

My small neighborhood street was a mix of destruction and perfection.

The black mud was everywhere, even on the sides of the homes. I drove through the town square, stores were busted out, and some burned. When I arrived on my street I wasn't hopeful about my home. Half the houses in my neighborhood had burned to the ground. It was a crap shoot when the fire balls fell from the sky.

My home was lucky.

Though covered in black, and my yard a mud bath, with the exception of broken windows, my house looked fine.

I needed to go there. It was my father's house, my house and my home with my son. I brought with me an empty duffle bag and revolver, and drove the Humvee there.

The package of cookies that Jackson was eating, still sat on the coffee table. It was covered in black thick ash, and I ran my fingers through it. There were things I needed. Things I wanted.

My boots sloshed in the thick wet substance that soaked my carpet. It didn't feel strange to be home, it felt safe. Safe from the world that crumbled. My world.

I was no less than heartbroken. I wanted to cry. Never in my life had I felt like such a fool.

Peter tried to talk to me before I left. I told him I needed to be alone. I found that salvation in my home. I ended up crying when I stepped into Jackson's room. My God did I miss my son. What would he had said about it all? What would Jackson had done?

Items in my dresser were completely fine. I grabbed some clothing items, and the photo album I forgot. When I lifted the photo album, there was an unframed wedding picture of me and Gil.

I had known Gil more years than I didn't know him. It was so hard to hear that he wasn't a good man. Deep in my heart, he was. Just misguided. Making bad decisions for good reasons ... like me.

"Anna."

I shuttered.

Tony's voice.

"What are you doing here, Tony?" I asked.

He stepped into the bedroom, "I followed you."

"I wanted to be alone."

"I need to talk to you."

I shut the dresser drawer and turned. "Talk."

"I'm sorry."

"Okay." I nodded.

"Anna ..."

"No. It makes sense now why Gil never recognized you."

"What I told you back then was the truth."

"Except you left out that you were watching Gil." I said. "Don't you think that was an important thing?"

"Why? I was watching him. Not you. You have some sort of hero worship for him, Anna. You wouldn't believe me anyhow. You still don't believe it."

"You still could have told me. I trusted you."

"You still can."

I laughed. "How? You lied to me."

"I never lied. I just never told you it all."

"I fell in love with you."

"I fell in love with you, too. I love you, Anna." Tony placed his hands on my arms. "Please. Believe that. That was never a lie."

"If you knew Gil was responsible for Pittsburgh, why did you let me come down here?"

Tony lifted his hands. "I don't know. A part of me hoped that maybe the government was responsible. Maybe they knew where they went. Would you have believed me if I told you everything?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. You knew you were going to be outed when we got here."

"I did."

"What about Dylan Camp? Were you telling Don about that?"

"No. No. My job was done. I wasn't getting information from Gil. He hates me. I fully intended to leave with you and start a life."

"Knowing he could hit that camp?" I asked. "That's what Don thinks. He thinks if Gil knows we are there, he's coming."

"Then we leave. We run. Tom and I were going to have an escape route. A lookout for incoming and an escape plan. There's a lake there. We make a getaway, and find a new place. Always ready to run."

"Is that how you want to live life?" I asked. "Looking over your shoulder?"

"I told you, Anna, none of this is our problem. There are no good guys and bad guys here. Just one with better intentions than the other. Two powers that will clash. That's the way of life. In every civilization, in every time, there have been people fighting to control it all. I just want us away from it. Until the better of the two gains control, we will have to run. It won't be safe. Unfortunately, there is

no way to help the better of the two gain control.”

I stepped back from Tony. “That’s not necessarily so. Sending Gwen was in the right direction.”

“Yeah, it was. However he didn’t like her or trust her enough. Had he been putty in her hands, then it would have been a different situation.”

I lifted my eyes to him. “Don thinks the right person can make a difference in a short period of time.”

The revelation hit him. I saw it. “No.” he said.

I turned away.

“Anna, you can’t. I love you. Joie loves you.”

“I know,” I faced him. “I love you, Tony. Even with the hurt I can’t help that. I love Joie, too. More than anything I want a safe world for you all.”

“Again, you cannot save the world.”

I shook my head. “I know I can’t. But I can save what is the world to me. That is those I have come to love. The only way to do that is to take Gwen’s place.”

“How long? I need a time frame. How long? Don’t say as long as it takes. If you can give me a time frame, I may accept it. How long?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can’t believe you are making this decision.”

I stopped him. “I haven’t made the decision. I promised you I would not make any more choices without thinking about all those involved. And I will. I haven’t made up my mind yet. When I do, it will be after I have thought it through and planned it out.”

“Tell me you aren’t doing this because you hate me.”

Sadly, I lowered my head and exhaled with a smile. “I can never hate you. Hurt? Yep. Disappointed... oh boy. Hate. No.” I leaned forward and kissed him softly. “Everyone seems to have a purpose, Tony. Yours is Joie. Everyone has a skill. Melissa, Craig, Peter. I’m not a leader. I’m privileged and survived because of that. Being back at this house reminded me that my main purpose before all this was Jackson. He’s gone. I need a purpose.”

“Joie and I aren’t enough?” he asked.

“More than you realize, you guys are the purpose that will drive my decision.” After kissing him once more on the cheek, I put our conversation on pause and returned to my home, taking in the memories and feeling it gave me.

It was my world before the comet, and covered in soot and ash, I needed to absorb that world for a little longer.

Twenty-Seven – Return

May 6

For as long as I could remember I made choices and decisions without thinking and doing what I was told. Even before the comet, I listened to my father and to Gil, they told me what school to attend, what music institute to send my son to. I bought what Gil told me to buy, like the aluminum foil and never did I question why.

I accepted what Tony told me at face value and placed my trust in his guidance. Except of course, when he was defiant about picking up strays on the way to the bunker.

In hindsight, those strays were valuable assets even Tony couldn't deny.

Nothing I ever did was ever intended to hurt anyone.

For the first time in my life, I fully made the decision on my own, weighed my options and before finalizing, considered those involved, even speaking to them.

Tony hurt me, but was it enough of a deceit that I couldn't forgive him? He was honest except with his work.

I made up my mind that life was too short and the world was too far gone to forget all the positive things Tony did for me. How he was there when I needed him, there for my son. And I like to think I was there for him as well.

Joie added a spark to me that I thought would forever be lost.

Unlike every other snap decision made in the heat of the moment, the decision I had to make wasn't done quickly, it took days.

It was for the best.

After three days at Damnation Alley, Tony and Joie left for South Carolina and I left with Peter for Protocol One. The Rufus radio act would be our means of staying in touch.

I made one call to Gil, letting him know I was fine and that I would explain when I returned.

When we got back to Protocol One, we were greeted in the bay by a frantic and devastated looking Gil.

I knew right then and there, I could be and do what was needed.

"My God." Gil grabbed hold of me. "What happened?" He locked his arms around me and I returned the embrace convincingly.

"It was scary. I owe my life to Peter," I said.

"Peter." Gil reached out to him. "I can't thank you enough."

We explained to Gil that after the exile, Tony had enough and without asking, set up the entire kidnapping with me to coincide with a run. Gwen was an unwilling participant because she was with Joie.

Peter had rigged a radio, got a hold of Mulligan and Damnation Alley came to our rescue.

Gwen decided to stay in Texas.

“Peter is loyal. But I’m surprised you wanted to leave,” Gil said.
“After all, you and Tony are...”

“Tony is not you. He can never be you. I realized that. This is where I belong.”

“Do you know where they are?” Gil asked.

“They picked us up in Kansas. So they are out west,” I answered.

“We’ll find them.”

“How?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll talk later. Right now, you two need to rest. It’s been rough for you.” Gil placed his arm around me. “I’m just glad you’re here with me.”

“Me, too.” I told him. “Me too.”

In our walk back into the bunker, I glanced at Peter. He had a certain expression, one of unknowing, as if he weren’t sure that Gil was entrusting us or entrapping us.

But I knew.

There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that Gil believed every bit of what we told him. I reiterated it by holding him, taking his embrace and selling the emotions.

Before leaving, I absorbed my remaining time with Tony and Joie, hoping that one day I would see them again. There was an underlying plan that it would only be for six months. Promising them I would try to adhere to that and one day pick up the pieces where we all left off. Find them in South Carolina and live that life with them, along with all the others. I would miss them horribly, but I was doing what I had to do to keep them safe. Keep them all safe. If I was at the bunker, if I made it into the heart of what Gil had planned, then I would accomplish what needed to be done.

There were a lot of secrets left to uncover, a lot of truths to be learned in my time there.

How everything eventually played out remained to be seen. In six months a lot would and could change.

The world was a different place. Survival was foremost, as was the continuity of mankind. I was doing my part to help out. At least I hoped.

Another full circle.

Not only did I go back to my home in Midland, I returned to Protocol One.

It wasn’t where I wanted to be, it was where I had to be.

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If you enjoyed this book and enjoy apocalyptic reading, please visit my website: www.jacquelinefruta.com

As always, I welcome any and all emails.